Thirty-Five Tons of Trash

by Carey Morishige, Marine Debris Outreach Coordinator, UH Sea Grant

Marine debris from all over the world washes up on Hawai'i's beaches. –Hawaii Wildlife Fund photo

Volunteers clean beaches along the Big Island's Waiohinu-Ka Lae Coast. –K. McElwee, NOAA photo

The February 2006 Clean Up

■ If you've ever walked along the shores of the Big Island's Waiohinu-Ka Lae coastline (northeast of South Point) you've seen large pieces of net strewn across and tangled in the sharp 'a'a lava, and the thousands of plastic pieces and trash items so thick in places that you cannot see the sand underneath.

If you've ever visited this area, you've also driven the 45 minutes that it takes to traverse the four-wheel-drive dirt road. Compound all of these factors, and you can imagine the scale and effort put behind one of the largest shoreline cleanups conducted in the main Hawaiian islands. This large-scale cleanup effort was coordinated by the non-profit environmental group, Hawai'i Wildlife Fund, with funding provided by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Marine Debris Program.

In four scheduled cleanup events from November 2005 to April 2006, more than 220 volunteers helped remove nearly 85,000 pieces of marine debris from this area. In total, almost 35 tons (70,000 lbs) of debris were removed from 9 miles of coastline. Volunteers from around the island and even as far away as Japan, Alaska and Washington gave up at least a day to help clean up this coast and help protect Hawai'i's environment.

The remote Waiohinu-Ka Lae coastline is an area known for its accumulation of marine debris. Brought there by currents and winds, debris from domestic and foreign sources in the greater Pacific washes ashore in this area. For example, derelict fishing nets found along this coast are most likely from out-of-state sources because no Hawai'i fishery utilizes nets. The exceptions are lay gillnets, which most likely come from local sources. Possibly one of the more severely impacted areas in the main Hawaiian islands, the Waiohinu-Ka Lae coast is also an area that is home to several marine protected species including the critically endangered Hawaiian monk seal and hawksbill and green sea turtles.

So, what do you do with 70,000 lbs of trash? Instead of discarding all of the removed debris in the county's landfill, potentially adding to an existing problem, the debris was recycled as much as possible. Smaller recyclables, such as beverage bottles, were given to the county's recycling program. The large conglomerations of derelict nets (which totaled approximately 30 tons) were kept at the Waiohinu Transfer Station and loaded into three 40-foot containers donated and transported by Matson Navigation Company. Matson shipped the full containers to O'ahu where Alliance Trucking transported them to the facility of Schnitzer Steel Hawai'i Corporation where the nets were chopped into small pieces suitable for incineration at the city and county of Honolulu/Covanta Energy's H-Power waste-to-energy facility. All services were donated free of charge. The support of these companies made possible the proactive recycling of the removed debris.

The nets recycled from this project produced enough electricity to power 12 homes for one year each (state Department of Business Economic Development and Tourism)!

University of Hawaii at Hilo students painstakingly remove onsnared nets from the sharp a'a lava along the Big Island's Waiohinu-Ka Lae Coast. –UH Sea Grant photo

Tons of derelict fishing nets removed from the Waiohinu-Ka Lae Coast are hoisted into the donated Matson container bound for O'ahu to be recycled into electricity. –Hawaii Wildlife Fund photo

How To Help

■ Marine debris poses a threat to both our environment and wildlife. Ghost nets entangle marine life, scour our coral reefs and pose a navigational hazard. Marine debris is a problem that we cannot ignore.

Marine debris:

- Affects the beauty (aesthetics) of Hawai'i's beaches and environment;
- Causes habitat destruction, including the breakage and smothering of coral reefs;
- Entangles (and many times kills) wildlife;
- Is ingested by sea birds (and other wildlife), routinely leading to starvation and even death;
- Is a navigational hazard and may cause vessel damage at sea; and
- Is a transport mechanism for alien species.

You can help by:

- Getting involved! Participate in local cleanups in your area.
- Remembering that our land and sea are connected, each affecting the other.
- Reducing the amount of waste you produce.
- Reusing items when you can! Choose reusable items over disposable ones.
- Recycling as much as possible!

For more information, please visit <http://marinedebris.noaa.gov>.

The NOAA Marine Debris Program works with other NOAA offices and partners to support national, state, local and international efforts to protect and conserve our nation's natural resources and coastal waterways from the impacts of marine debris.

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Barbara Nowak, O'ahu resident and longtime environmental volunteer, traveled to the Big Island just to participate in the two-day February cleanup event. She commented, "I have seen photos of the debris in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands and the effects of marine debris on our environment, but nothing prepares you for the impact of standing amidst thousands of pieces of trash right here in our main Hawaiian islands. The amount of debris and net is jaw-dropping, but to see others just as committed to this problem and to see the beaches so much cleaner, you know that in the end it was all worth it."

Thanks to the help of project volunteers, partners and coordinators, these cleanups were successful in removing a literal mountain of marine debris from this area. Though this project is complete, it is hoped that these efforts will continue with the help of local nonprofits, schools and community groups. By recognizing the problem and working together, this project is evidence that we *can* make a difference.

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