

Exploration of Regional Community Perspectives on Marine Debris: Attitudes, Opinions, Challenges & Opportunities

In the winter/spring of 2010, three focus groups were conducted in Georgetown, Charleston and Beaufort with various coastal stakeholders to identify and discuss marine debris issues within each region. This executive summary describes the common themes, regional differences and recommendations on how to address specific marine debris issues.

Common Themes

Clarification of Agency Involvement & Roles

The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SC DNR), the SC Department of Health and Environmental Control (SC DHEC) and the SC DHEC Office of Coastal Resource Management (OCRM) were frequently cited as having a role in marine debris education, prevention and removal. The US Coast Guard and county and city governments were also considered to have a role to play. However, the jurisdiction and responsibilities of these agencies is unclear. Clarification of the laws and agencies responsible for enforcement are needed.

Disconnect about General Litter becoming Marine Debris

The general consensus coastwide was that local citizens and visitors do not associate the fact that general litter ends up in the marine environment as marine debris. The only people aware of the connection are those that spend time out in the waterways and see abandoned vessels, large marine debris items and general litter in the water and along the shore.

Need for Increased Education and Outreach

Although the participants could identify sources and information tools about marine debris, they still felt that the general public was not getting the message and showed a lack of concern for or understanding of marine debris issues. They felt that the connection between inland litter and improper disposal of large debris, and marine debris issues such as habitat damage, fisheries impacts and navigation hazards were not being made. Potential sources of information to the general public are being underutilized. These include local newspapers and TV stations, webcasts and websites, community organizations such as churches and clubs, and community events such as festivals. Volunteer clean-up activities could also be better employed as a method of education and engaging community members, but there are concerns over liability issues and where to dispose of debris that is collected.

Regional Differences

Derelict/Abandoned Vessels

There were differences in the causes of derelict vessels in the three regions. Problem vessels in Beaufort were characterized primarily as commercial fishing vessels thought to be the result of economic hardship due to rising operating costs and low shrimp prices, Charleston lack of mooring laws, and Georgetown rivershacks becoming derelict and abandoned.

Fishing Gear

Beaufort was the only region that discussed derelict/abandoned crab traps as an issue. The concern centered around both commercial crab traps becoming derelict when lines were cut and recreational crab traps not being tended and then left in the water by citizens and tourists. Neither Charleston nor Georgetown described fishing gear as a major marine debris issue in these regions.

Education, Promotion and Volunteer Opportunities

While all regions expressed the need to increase opportunities in all of these areas, the methods used to deliver these opportunities appear to be different between regions. Georgetown expressed the need to use local cable access

channels, Charleston described using success stories in newspapers to highlight events and clean-ups and in Beaufort participants described the need for organizing more cleanups and opportunities for an amnesty program for disposal.

Recommendations

- Clarify agency responsibilities with respect to reporting, removal and disposal.
- Better utilize existing educational materials, resources and opportunities.
- Consider one central website/portal to use for education on marine debris – issues, reporting, prevention, removal and disposal.
- Streamline outreach efforts and materials to have clear consistent messages about marine debris and then tailor them to target the specific issues of each region.
- Explore partnerships, between community groups, government and industry, to increase funding and involvement to support marine debris prevention, removal and disposal.
- Help citizens understand the connection between general everyday litter and introduction of marine debris to the environment.
- Work with local governments, waste management services and community groups to organize an amnesty based cleanup event to provide an opportunity for citizens to dispose of larger items without penalty.
- Work with local governments and planning agencies to raise awareness about local marine debris issues/concerns within these entities to help make marine debris prevention and removal a priority for water-based planning policies.
- Establish a clear protocol and mechanism for reporting marine debris that is accessible to all regions of the coast (i.e., Hotline phone number, web-based, etc.).

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