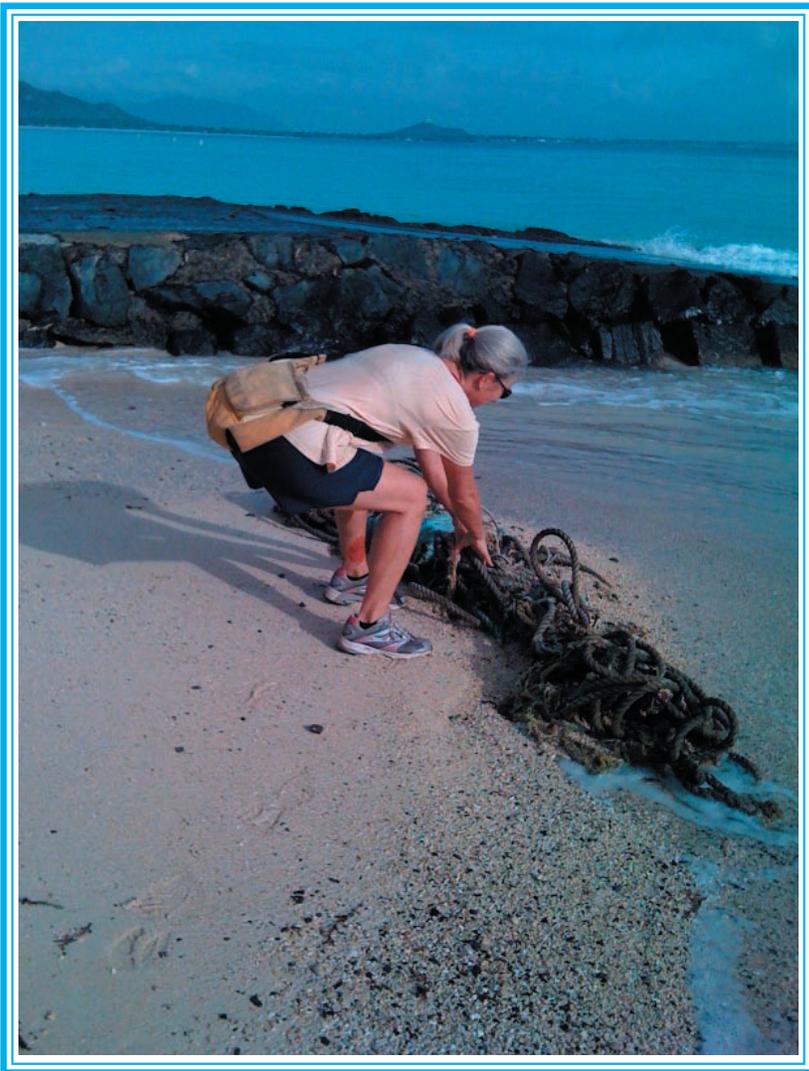


# NOAA Marine Science Career - Case Studies

## Kris McElwee

Pacific Islands Marine Debris Coordinator

*Do you want to help clean our beaches and oceans for a living? Kris McElwee is the Pacific Islands Marine Debris Coordinator. Kris took some time to share with us how she became involved in protecting the health of our oceans, saving our marine ecosystems, and teaching others how they can help clean up our oceans and beaches.*



**How did you first become interested in ocean health and marine debris?** I have always been interested in water. Growing up I used to enjoy swimming in lakes and being a lifeguard. One summer I took a high school training program on the science of freshwater pollution. It was many years after that when I began to work in a marine-related field. After completing my service in the Peace Corps I decided to go back to school, to study marine resource management. As a graduate student, I worked at an international aquaculture research program. I then moved to Hawaii and began working with NOAA, to directly improve the health of our ocean, by helping to clean up Marine Debris.

Marine debris has become a topic of great public interest, and I'm happy to be involved in finding solutions. It's given me the opportunity to combine the two things I'm most interested in, science and policy. Most days I work in an office, but still manage to meet with people all over the world through conference calls to places like America Samoa, Guam, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Washington D.C., Seattle, and Korea. About once a year,

I get to go on a research vessel out to sea for three or four weeks. The coolest thing I have been a part of was a marine debris removal trip in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. I worked every day on small boats and hauled nets onboard. It was hard work, but the benefit to the coral reefs, monk seals, and sea turtles was obvious and immediate.

### **What kinds of marine debris are most common in Hawaii and what can people do to help?**

The best part of marine debris removal is that everyone can help. Beach cleanup is a type of immediate and gratifying work that really does make a difference. You can help by picking up and throwing out a few pieces of debris (litter) every time you go to the beach. The most common types of debris we find are cigarette butts, bottle caps, lids, food wrappers and containers. Debris like fishing nets and lines are some of the most dangerous types of debris for animals because they can get tangled up in them. If we make good choices about reducing the amount of waste we create, recycle plastics, and reuse materials, we can make a big difference. By serving as good examples, you can encourage your family and friends to do those things too.

### **What can students do to get involved in your field?**

There are many ways to get involved in marine debris management. If you are interested in helping reduce our impact on the environment, you should take advantage of internships, independent learning, and networks (friends of friends and people you meet). There is no degree in marine debris, so you will need a broad education with science, policy and social science. Don't be afraid to ask questions of adults who have a career you are interested in.

