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Dangers of Ocean Plastic Subject of Oregon and Coast Lectures

By Zan Dubin

(Oregon Coast) - The giant islands of plastic waste in the world's oceans is the subject of a series of free lectures in Portland, Salem and Newport this month.



A snapping turtle was caught in a piece of plastic while young - and grew around it. (photo Zan Dubin)

Dr. Marcus Eriksen and Anna Cummins of California's Algalita Marine Research Foundation (AMRF) are delivering these lectures to educators, policymakers and the public along the West Coast. They are also bicycling some 2,000 miles to these programs, in a quest to end the age of disposable plastics.

Eriksen and Cummins will show photographs from a decade of research at sea: a dead turtle trapped in a plastic lawn chair, an albatross carcass bulging with tooth brushes and bottle tops, and the plastic-filled stomach contents of fish commonly served in restaurants.

The Oregon JUNKride 2009 presentations begin in Portland on April 21 at Keen Footwear.

On April 22, the program takes place at Tokyo International University of America in Salem, Oregon.

April 27 finds them on the Oregon coast at the Hatfield Marine Science Center in Newport.

"In ten years, the amount of trash floating out to sea has doubled," says Eriksen, AMRF director of research and education. "We've got to find a better way soon. We're already finding plastic waste in the food we eat."

AMRF, a nonprofit organization near Los Angeles, was founded by Captain Charles Moore, who first put the plastic soup problem on the map and spoke at this year's TED Conference.

"Moore's work made it clear that plastic pollution is having a major impact on our marine environment," says world renowned biologist Daniel Pauly, former director of the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia. "I commend Marcus Eriksen and Anna Cummins for raising broader awareness of this grave problem with JUNKride."

Eriksen and Cummins, AMRF's education advisor, launched JUNKride 2009 at the Vancouver Aquarium, then headed south for lectures on the environmental and human health impacts of plastic marine pollution. They're stopping at universities, schools, other aquariums and the like.



Fish with plastic particles taken from its stomach (photo Zan Dubin)

AMRF has focused its research on the North Pacific Gyre, a swirling vortex of ocean currents twice the size of the United States, in which a vast plastic buildup, or soup, is rapidly growing.

"We haven't seen the worst of it and have yet to fully delineate the area," says Moore. "This summer's research voyage seeks to validate models that show the highest levels of marine debris are northwest of Hawaii near the International Date Line."

Eriksen, a Gulf War vet, sailed through the gyre from Long Beach to Hawaii last summer aboard Algalita's JUNKkraft made of 15,000 plastic bottles. For JUNKride, he and Cummins will hand out 100 jars of debris-filled ocean water collected on the trip.

Says Cummins: "We hope to educate a new generation by going to schools and encouraging students to think about where exactly "away is" in our throwaway society. We must start seeing the link between consumerism and long-term environmental impact."

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