

Marine Health Hubs:

Building interdisciplinary regional hubs of excellence to research and address the societal impacts of marine debris across the globe

Ocean Decade: U.S. Launch Meeting | February 3-4, 2021



Introduction:

- Marine debris, defined by NOAA as "any persistent solid material that is manufactured or processed and directly or indirectly, intentionally, or unintentionally, disposed of or abandoned into the marine environment" may originate along beaches or in rivers; be brought indirectly to the sea with rivers, sewage, storm water or winds; or discarded at sea.²
- An estimated 80% of marine debris originates as land-based trash, while the remaining 20% is attributed to intentional or unintentional disposal or loss at sea.³ Furthermore, the current global plastics production rate (>300 million tons produced annually, worldwide), coupled with mismanagement of waste, is a significant contributing factor leading to macro-, micro-, and nano-plastic waste in our oceans and along coastlines. It has been argued that the potential irreversible nature and global reach of marine plastic pollution meets conditions for a planetary boundary threat of chemical pollution.⁵
- Significant efforts to date have focused on understanding and addressing the marine debris challenge based on drivers related to environmental management and economics, such as potential impacts to fisheries and aquaculture, preserving biodiversity, or reducing negative impacts on tourism, recreation and real estate. However, despite increasing evidence of microplastic contamination across a variety of environmental media (e.g., water, land and air), research into better understanding the cumulative human exposures to microplastics are currently lacking, ^{6,7} resulting in lingering uncertainty ^{8,9} for what could be the next emerging environmental health challenge.







Photos courtesy of NOAA's Marine Debris Program



Proposed Ocean Shot Concept: Marine Health Hubs

- Our proposed Marine Health Hubs (MHH) program will build capacity for and mobilize interdisciplinary teams worldwide to address marine debris across the continuum of research to application (See Figure 1, Slide 4).
- Partnering with academia, research institutes, non-profit and private organizations, and the public sector, we will establish self-sustaining regional hubs of excellence to promote interdisciplinary collaboration to tackle plastic marine waste, from not only an environmental and economic lens, but also through a social lens, to better understand and address potential impacts on human health and social equity.
- Applying principles of a collective impact approach, MHHs will advance scientific research and technology development, collect and manage data, translate research to inform policy-making across various scales and sectors, and provide public outreach and education efforts. In addition to better understanding and addressing existing marine debris impacts, MHHs will also focus on mitigating future marine debris through innovative technology development of sustainable alternatives and promotion of a circular economy to prevent plastic waste and pollution of our marine environments and dependent communities.

Relevant Decade Challenges:

KNOWLEDGE AND SOLUTIONS CHALLENGES



Challenge 1: Understand and map land and sea-based sources of pollutants and contaminants and their potential impacts on human health and ocean ecosystems, and develop solutions to remove or mitigate them.



Challenge 2: Understand the effects of multiple stressors on ocean ecosystems, and develop solutions to monitor, protect, manage and restore ecosystems and their biodiversity under changing environmental, social and climate conditions.



Challenge 4: Generate knowledge, support innovation, and develop solutions for equitable and sustainable development of the ocean economy under changing environmental, social and climate conditions.

FOUNDATIONAL CHALLENGES



Challenge 9: Ensure comprehensive capacity development and equitable access to data, information, knowledge and technology across all aspects of ocean science and for all stakeholders.



Challenge 10: Ensure multiple values and services of the ocean for human wellbeing, culture, and sustainable development are understood; identify and overcome barriers to behavior change required for a change in humanity's relationship with the ocean.





Figure 1: Marine Health Hubs Will Address Topics Across the Continuum of Research to Application

Advancing Science & Technology

- Stakeholders: academia, R&D institutions, government, private sector, STEM education
- Develop consensus-based research agendas
- Foster regional networks to conduct collaborative research and technology development
- Facilitate data collection, analysis, standardization and sharing across the research community
- Identify opportunities to promote reputation of incountry researchers

Capacity Development and Informing Decisions

- Stakeholders: research community, government, NGOs, boundary organizations
- Foster connections between research community and policy- or decision-makers
- Translate science for evidencebased policies and interventions
- Develop in-country capacity for informed policy-making and citizen engagement
- Develop and share best practices and lessons learned

Citizen Engagement and Public Outreach

- Stakeholders: government institutions, academia, NGOs, STEM education, public
- Translate science into messaging for various audiences
- Design and conduct education and outreach campaigns to increase awareness and influence behavior change
- Promote public participation in environmental decision-making
- Include STEM or citizen science activities for outreach goals

Assessment & Evaluation

- Stakeholders: research community, government, implementation partners, endusers, funders
- Assess value-add of activities and outputs
- Identify evolving needs and existing gaps
- Refine strategic planning and adapt activities based on feedback
- Promote accountability and societal impact

EARLY, ROUTINE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT TO ENSURE LOCALLY & CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE RESEARCH, TOOLS, & SOLUTIONS





Proposed Methods:

- While MHHs will be expected to address topics across the continuum of research to application, initial scoping and prioritization of each hub's strategic implementation plan will vary, building upon existing infrastructure and capacity assets.
- Utilizing a capacity building framework, MHHs will focus on consensus-based agenda setting, co-development of and co-investment in action plans, and an applied learning approach for knowledge transfer and peer-to-peer information sharing. This will be accomplished through activities such as:
 - Stakeholder mapping, environmental scans, stakeholder needs assessments, or gap analyses to develop situational assessments for each MHH jurisdiction or region
 - Delphi methodology and/or stakeholder dialogue sessions to reach consensus on research agendas and priority setting for themes, topics, and projects
 - Expert consultations, study tours, fellowships, and trainings to develop in-country, cross-sectoral capacity for translational, evidence-based science, policy, and interventions
- Through co-development, co-design, and co-investment of MHH infrastructure, networks, and action plans, the program strives to set the foundation for self-sustaining programs that will stand the test of time and adapt to evolving needs.



Photos courtesy of NOAA's Marine Debris
Program and EPA's Trash-Free Waters Program



Anticipated Results & Impact:

The MHHs would provide opportunity to move the needle forward in understanding and addressing the human and ecosystem health impacts of marine debris as demonstrated by anticipated mid- and long-term results and improved collective societal impact, such as:

- Advances in scientific research, datasets, and tools
- Innovative technology development
- New partnerships within and across sectors
- Improved collaboration
- Increased knowledge and skills across various stakeholder groups
- Translation of research to meet the needs of various audiences
- Development of informed, evidence-based policies and interventions
- Increased citizen awareness of environmental issues and engagement in solutions
- More efficient utilization of resources
- Reduced marine debris and plastics pollution
- Reduced impact on human and ecosystem health



Next Steps:

We welcome feedback and engagement to help make our concept a reality.

Our anticipated next steps include:

- Collect feedback on concept and proposed framework for implementation
- Generate and iterate on ideas for potential Marine Health Hub activities
- Connect with interested partners, both in the U.S. and in various regions across the world
- Identify and pursue potential sources of funding
- Continue to engage in Ocean Decade activities and networks

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