



DATASHIFT

An underwater photograph showing a large shark on the left, a diver in the foreground, and another diver further away in the background. The water is clear blue with many small fish.

DIVE AGAINST DEBRIS

CASE STUDY

INITIATIVE NAME:
DIVE AGAINST DEBRIS

ONLINE PRESENCE:
**[HTTP://WWW.PROJECTAWARE.ORG/
DIVEAGAINSTDEBRISMAP](http://www.projectaware.org/diveagainstdebrismap)**

GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE:
INTERNATIONAL

In 2011, the team at Project AWARE launched the Dive Against Debris program with the objective of better documenting the amount of marine debris found in the world's oceans. This global citizen science program trains volunteer scuba divers from across the globe to conduct underwater surveys, generating quantitative data on the debris they see. After cleaning this data for quality assurance, it is then published on their interactive Dive Against Debris Map. This data and visualization informs the team's advocacy work, ultimately seeking to generate changes in policy.

The impact of marine debris is devastating, killing marine life and changing their habitats and ecosystems. Animals are extremely vulnerable to ingestion or entanglement which leads to death, as they are unable to distinguish between what is trash and what is not.

Photo taken from
<http://www.projectaware.org/resource/show-your-support-aware-certification-cards-poster>

Beyond this, as microscopic pieces of plastic enter the food chain, most seafood ingested by humans also likely contains marine debris.¹

Project AWARE is a growing movement of scuba divers protecting the ocean, with a long history of working on the marine debris issue. Through its work, the Project AWARE team found that there was a significant lack of data available regarding underwater marine debris.

To remedy this, the Dive Against Debris program was launched in 2011. The program seeks to collect and visualise data generated by their volunteers, then use this data to influence policy changes and raise social awareness around the world. This data collection is unique in that it focuses exclusively on yielding data about the types and quantities of marine debris items found beneath in the ocean, an issue Hannah Pragnell-Raasch, a Program Specialist with Project AWARE, told us “has previously been disregarded as out of sight, out of mind, as the everyday person is not exposed to the harmful impacts.”²

To date, Dive Against Debris surveys have been conducted in over 50 countries,³ with the top reporting countries being the United States, Thailand and Greece. As more divers get involved with Dive Against Debris, Project AWARE continues to bring visibility to the problem of marine debris and helps to identify target areas for waste prevention efforts.

DEBRIS AND THE MAP

Since 2011, divers have conducted 1772 surveys, reporting and removing 542,340 pieces of debris.⁴ The majority of this is plastic, with 344,796 pieces collected.⁵ The weight of these items combined is equal to that of over 3000 people. The items themselves are very diverse, “from the weird and whacky items like a pogo stick or set of false teeth to the usual suspects – plastic bags, drinks bottles and aluminum cans”.⁶ As Pragnell-Raasch said in her interview, “with 150 million metric tons of mismanaged plastic conservatively estimated to make

1 Joanne Marston, “Down and Dirty with Data”, April 13, 2015, accessed October 16, 2015, <http://www.projectaware.org/update/down-and-dirty-data>

2 We exchanged emails with Project AWARE’s Program Specialist Hannah Pragnell-Raasch to better understand the challenges the group has faced.

3 <http://www.projectaware.org/action-zone>

4 According to the number on the Dive Against Debris Map, accessed on October 19, 2015, <http://www.projectaware.org/diveagainstdebrismap>

5 Ibid

6 Joanne Marston, “Down and Dirty with Data”, April 13, 2015, accessed October 16, 2015, <http://www.projectaware.org/update/down-and-dirty-data>

THE DATA & SCUBA DIVERS

While there have been over 25,600 divers in more than 1,500 Dive Against Debris surveys across the globe, there is more to be done.⁹ Project AWARE hope that more divers will get involved and “put their scuba skills to good use”.¹⁰ But the group of citizens who can contribute to this effort is somewhat limited: only divers have the skills required to collect this data.

Anyone can take part in a Dive Against Debris survey, as long as they are a certified diver. As described in their “Action Zone”, scuba divers can either “join” or “create” an action.¹¹ To further support the program, Project AWARE launched the Dive Against Debris Distinctive Specialty, a course of divers, which “aims to equip students (scuba divers) with the skills and knowledge necessary to conduct their own Dive Against Debris Surveys.”¹²

Before the data appears on the interactive Dive Against Debris Map, it goes through a quality review in order to ensure data integrity. The survey leader at Project AWARE corrects any data inconsistencies. Then, as the focus is exclusively on what is found underwater, all land data is removed. Project AWARE Aware aims to create “an accurate perspective about underwater marine debris, that policy-makers simply cannot ignore”.¹³

DATA FOR POLICY CHANGES

The ultimate objective of collecting this data is to change the way the marine debris issue is addressed around the globe. In order to address this, the Project AWARE team believes in policy changes—including passing and then enforcing stronger regulations, at local, national and international levels. They are actively seeking out opportunities to present their findings to policymakers to improve waste management, presenting at international conferences,¹⁴ speaking directly with governments and working with alliance partners.

9 These numbers are from April, 13 2015 when the “Down and Dirty Data” article was published. According to the numbers of the Map on October 19, 2015, there have been 1772 surveys, more than 200 since April 2015.

10 Taken from our email exchanges with Hannah Pragnell-Raasch.

11 <http://www.projectaware.org/action-zone>

12 <http://www.projectaware.org/diveagainstdebrismap>

13 Joanne Marston, “Down and Dirty with Data”, April 13, 2015, accessed October 16, 2015, <http://www.projectaware.org/update/down-and-dirty-data>

14 For example, last year Project AWARE delivered the outstanding work of Dive Against Debris volunteers at the Conference of Parties to the Convention of Migratory Species and at the IUCN World Parks Congress. (DIRTY)

NEXT STEPS

Although the team at Project AWARE has done an excellent job leading the way in the data collection, the biggest area of opportunity is to develop and widen their network, reaching and affecting more countries. This year they have already started working on a framework for involvement with various local groups across a number of countries.¹⁵ As Pragnell-Raasch told us, their role is “to bring the underwater perspective to the partnerships we’re forming through the data we collect and the actions our community takes.”¹⁶

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¹⁵ Project AWARE is also a member of the Seas at Risk Alliance, the Boomerang Alliance and the Trash Free Seas Alliance.

¹⁶ Joanne Marston, “Down and Dirty with Data”, April 13, 2015, accessed October 16, 2015, <http://www.projectaware.org/update/down-and-dirty-data>



DataShift is a multi-stakeholder, demand-driven initiative that builds the capacity and confidence of civil society to produce and use citizen-generated data to monitor sustainable development progress, demand accountability and campaign for transformative change. Ultimately, our vision is a world where people-powered accountability drives progress on sustainable development.

DataShift is an initiative of **CIVICUS**, in partnership with **the engine room** and **Wingu**. For more information, visit www.thedatashift.org or contact datashift@civicus.org.

