

Liz Fox:

This is Liz Fox at Positively Ocean, where we celebrate the ocean and look at what is working well. This week's story takes us to the shores of San Francisco. A city that drums right up to the edge of the ocean, and the ocean response by carpeting the city in its signature dense fog. Daily flocks of birds and rats or pods of marine mammals frequent the beaches, and other days they wash up dead. But which changes are significant, say from a catastrophic pollutant, like oil spill. And which changes are a part of the normal ebb and flow of where the ocean meets the land. To answer those questions scientists need data, and lots of it. That's why Beach Watch, a long-term volunteer monitoring program supports a group of ocean fanatics to scour the shores monthly. It all began after the 1971 oil tanker collision at the mouth of the bay. Scientists knew that the spill had devastated coastal life, but they couldn't quantify it. Without accurate accounting, no one could specify clean up demands. So scientists at the Point Reyes Bird Observatory now known as the Point Blue Conservation Science began counting. They assigned community members, citizens and non-citizens alike to specific pots of the beach to observe and record birds and marine mammals, both dead and alive. Doctor Sarah Allen collected and crunched beach data when the program began, today she is the science program lead for the National Park Service, western division.

Sarah Allen:

What is terrific about the Beach Watch program is that this is some highly trained group of volunteers, and because they're really well trained, the data has held up to scrutiny.

Liz Fox:

By highly trained, Allen means that Beach Watch volunteers study and practice rigorously for about 80 hours with a mentor before they hit the beach on their own. And most volunteers stick around for years, becoming true experts in their assigned areas. The investment pays off, because of its historic reputation, scientists and policy makers trust Beach Watch data to inform their decisions.

Sarah Allen:

Beach Watch foundation can be applied to any potential threat.

Liz Fox:

Allen said that Beach Watch data clearly demonstrated the fatal effects of kill net fishing on marine mammals and birds in the 1980s, then resource managers decided to ban the practice in some parts of coastal California. Likewise, regulators change shipping lanes to avoid large marine mammal feeding grounds, to reduce the potential for ship strikes. Now under the leadership of the Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, and the Greater Farallones Association, the Beach Watch program has grown its number of volunteers, and expanded it's geographic reach, and added to it's tallies evidence of ambient oil. Those tar like beach blobs that regularly wash up. Today, Beach Watch includes a hundred and fifty volunteers who cover the two hundred and ten mile stretch between Point Año Nuevo and San Mateo County and Manchester Beach and Mendocino County. While volunteers typically

already care about the natural world, their participation in Beach Watch ensures more of the public has a greater understanding and perceived stake in policy outcomes.

Sarah Allen:

Their also your best advocates, because they are experiencing real world things that happen on their beaches. Their finding California Sea Lions that are starving because there's an El Niño event. Their finding dead whales that have been hit by ships, and so they can be an advocate and communicate their own personal experiences to the broader public.

Liz Fox:

The Greater Farallones Association will host two Beach Watch volunteer orientation sessions this summer. The first is in Gualala, Saturday July 8 from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m, and the second is in Bodega Bay on Wednesday July 12 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. After orientation, new volunteers must complete an eighty hour training in August. To get involved, or for more information about Beach Watch, visit farallones.noaa.gov. That's F-A-R-A-L-L-O-N-E-S dot N-O-A-A dot G-O-V. And that's an example of folks steering right by the ocean, until next time, i'll be searching for all thing Positively Ocean.