Coastal Observation Program Seeks Volunteers

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Jennifer Canfield/KMXT

The Coastal Observation and Seabird Survey Team Program, or COASST, was inspired by the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Dr. Julia Parrish came to Alaska when the disaster happened and realized that without a baseline, it was hard to scientifically determine how much damage the spill had done to wildlife populations. She went back to Washington and ten years later, in 1999, she started COASST. The program relies on scientists and everyday beachcombers to report bird carcasses along beaches in from northernmost Alaska to California.

Jane Dolliver oversees the Alaska region for COASST. She gives an example of how the data might be used.

-- (coasst 1 :26 "So maybe the mortality was pretty spread amongst species except one species experienced a lot of mortality and then you can say ‘we never actually get common muirs, for instance, on this beach during this time of year' and we know that because of the baseline. And so for common muirs it actually represents 80 percent more mortality than we usually see."

The program is housed at the University of Washington's School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences and receives funding from the North Pacific Research Board, the Alaska Fishery Science Center and several other state and federal agencies. Dolliver says their work helps scientists explain what might otherwise be mysterious die offs and can identify species that are especially at risk.

-- (coasst 2 :19 "I don't think that there's been any necessarily unexplained events. Usually when you move back and hindcast and try to figure those out, various ocean conditions or things pop in to the picture, then the story can be explained.

The program in Alaska has over 160 workers, with 10 to 15 of those in Kodiak. Some are volunteers and some participate in the program through their jobs, namely those who work in Alaska's Maritime National Wildlife Refuge in the Aleutians. Dolliver says COASST will visit Kodiak in March or April to offer a training workshop for those interested in the program.

Learn more here .