

**SHERRY LIPPIATT | California Regional Coordinator, NOAA Marine Debris Program/  
IM Systems Group (sherry.lippiatt@noaa.gov)**

**Degree: When, where, what, and what in?**

In 2006, I earned my bachelor of science degree in environmental science at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in upstate New York. I didn't have a specific career path in mind, but found that I enjoyed being a student, and pursued graduate school. I joined Ken Bruland's lab in the Ocean Sciences Department at University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC), and finished my PhD in 2011. My dissertation focused on the biogeochemical cycling of iron, specifically the availability of particulate iron to phytoplankton in the northern Gulf of Alaska.

**Did you stay in academia at all, and if so, for how long?**

No. Though I had a postdoc lined up, I was also accepted to the John A. Knauss Marine Policy Fellowship Program. The fellowship felt like a better fit because I was interested in making a broader impact while maintaining connections to the research community. I moved to Washington, DC, in early 2010.

**How did you go about searching for a job outside of the university setting?**

A college internship at the National Institute of Standards and Technology piqued my interest in the government sector, so I had been researching fellowship opportunities. The Knauss Fellowship was my top option, and I put a lot of effort into writing a strong application.

I was a member of the 2010 Knauss Fellowship class, and matched with the NOAA Marine Debris Program (MDP). The MDP was quite small and growing at the time, and I was invited to join the staff after my fellowship to support the program's diverse research portfolio.

**Is this the only job (post-academia) that you've had? If not, what else did you do?**

Yes and no. I've shifted roles within the MDP. I worked out of the headquarters office in Silver Spring, Maryland, for a couple of years, building our citizen science shoreline monitoring program from the ground up. I was offered the opportunity to move back to California in 2012, and now serve as the first ever California Regional Coordinator for the MDP.

**What is your current job? What path did you take to get there?**

The MDP created the California Regional Coordinator position following the tragic earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011. There was a lot of public concern and interest around the debris generated, where and when it would wash up, and what the impacts would be. My boss knew that I was interested in returning to the West Coast, and I had proven to be an effective communicator and partnership builder, so it was a good fit.

As the sole staff member in the state for a relatively small (~20 person) NOAA program, every day is different. I serve as the technical monitor for our marine debris research, prevention, and removal grant projects in the state, and help develop our funding priorities based on regional needs. This requires a lot of coordination with external partners from academia, nonprofits, industry, and other government agencies. I worked closely with the California Ocean Protection Council to host a series of stakeholder workshops, which led to the publication of the 2018 California Ocean Litter Prevention Strategy. The Strategy now serves as a guiding document for the community to tackle this issue over the next five years.



In addition to my duties as a Regional Coordinator, I still lead our nationwide Marine Debris Monitoring and Assessment Project (MDMAP). I am the point of contact for any technical questions from our shoreline monitoring partners, guide redevelopment of our database, and regularly compile and share results with our participants. In 2016, I was honored as a National Ocean Service Team Member of the Year for my leadership of the MDMAP.

**What did your oceanographic education (or academic career) give you that is useful in your current job?**

Marine debris is an interdisciplinary issue that touches on everything from chemical, physical, and biological oceanography, to ecotoxicology, materials science, socioeconomics, and human behavior. My coursework and research gave me a great basis for understanding the issue, and having spent time at sea helps me relate to the PIs and research projects our program funds. But there are other aspects of my training that are even more relevant. I spend a lot of time summarizing complicated ideas, gathering evidence

to make sound recommendations for next steps, and critically reviewing technical proposals. My position requires juggling a lot of projects and tasks at once, so I have to effectively manage my time and be comfortable jumping from one topic to the next.

**Is there any course or other training you would have liked to have had as part of your graduate education to meet the demands of the job market?**

Communicating with a variety of audiences is the number one skill required for my job. I would have benefited from more experience speaking to nonscientists and building partnerships with relevant agencies and other stakeholders to connect my research to resource management questions. Instead, it's been trial by fire, and while at NOAA I've been fortunate to take additional training in project management, meeting planning and facilitation, science communication, and designing behavior change projects for environmental outcomes.

**Is the job satisfying? What aspects of the job do you like best/least?**

I really enjoy my job. I think a big part of that is the feeling that I'm providing valuable support to stakeholders, and making important contributions to addressing plastic pollution and other types of marine debris in California. I may feel like I spent all day responding to emails and joining conference calls, but there's still a sense of satisfaction and forward progress. There are inherent restrictions and roadblocks working for a government agency, but that comes with the opportunity to influence public policy.

**Do you have any recommendations for new grads looking for jobs?**

Be curious, ask questions, and do not be afraid to take on new responsibilities. I've been in so many situations where I felt completely unqualified to do something; each and every one was a growth opportunity. 📍