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December 13, 2016

Julia Wyman's Post

The Threat of Marine Debris

Posted by Julia Wyman on 12/13/2016 at 10:35 AM



This year marks the 20th Anniversary of the Marine Affairs Institute. To celebrate, we hosted the 10th Marine Law Symposium, *Legal and Policy Approaches to Reduce Marine Debris in New England*, on November 5. We partnered with the Roger Williams Law Review to host the symposium, and highlighted the work of our students during our Welcome Dinner on November 4.

The symposium focused on a problem that poses a great threat to coastlines around the world: marine debris. Every year, derelict fishing gear, plastic bottles, plastic bags, cigarette butts, abandoned vessels, and other debris washes ashore throughout the world.



The debris causes negative social, environmental, and economic impacts, such as decreased aesthetic value, harm to coastal ecosystem health, and damage to vessels and gear. The challenges create complex management problems for coastal managers and attorneys, who work to mitigate the creation of new debris and remove and manage debris that washes ashore.

We were extremely fortunate to have two keynote speakers at the symposium: Senator Sheldon Whitehouse and Dr. Sandra Whitehouse, Senior Policy Advisor at Ocean Conservancy. Senator Whitehouse spoke on his work as co-chair of the bipartisan Senate Oceans Caucus. The Senate Oceans Caucus works to raise awareness of coastal and marine issues, including marine debris, and find common ground on legislation that affects our oceans, Great Lakes, and coasts. Dr. Whitehouse provided attendees with an overview of the science behind marine debris on both national and international levels.



The symposium program focused on how New England can address the complex problem of marine debris. In addition to our wonderful keynote speakers, attendees heard from national and local experts about how serious the threat of marine debris is, and some innovative ways we, as attorneys, practitioners, and educators, can begin to address this threat. In addition to examining the problem from a large national and international scale, attendees heard some novel regional and local approaches to reducing and eliminating marine debris. Finally, speakers discussed potential next steps for legal and policy strategies to prevent and manage marine debris. For the Marine Affairs Institute, this means the opportunity to engage our Sea Grant Law Fellows in future research!

The symposium drew a very diverse audience: attorneys; federal, state, and local government employees; non-profit and for profit businesses; and students from nine universities throughout New England. I was particularly encouraged by how much student interest there is in this timely topic, because today's students are the future practitioners addressing this problem.

If you missed the symposium, fear not! The video from the program will be available shortly on our website, <http://law.rwu.edu/marine-affairs-institute>. Also, in 2017 there will be a special edition of the Roger Williams Law Review published, with articles from some of the symposium's presenters, other practitioners, and several students.