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Freeing the sea: Ocean Defenders make 'ghost gear' vanish



Photo courtesy ODA/Erich Fertschneider

Ocean Defenders Alliance divers attach lift bags to bring abandoned lobster traps to the surface at the La Jennelle site Oct. 3.

Perry Van Houten, *Ojai Valley News senior reporter*

Every year, an estimated 140,000 marine mammals worldwide die in “ghost gear” — abandoned fishing gear such as nets, lines and traps.

“That’s turtles, whales, dolphins. And that’s not even counting the lobsters and all the smaller animals,” said Kurt Lieber of Ocean Defenders Alliance. “That’s a staggering number.”

In 2017, as many as 72 entangled whales were reported off the California coast, said Lieber, founder and president of the nonprofit that works to keep the oceans free of debris. “Who wants to see a whale or a dolphin entangled in this gear? I don’t think anybody wants to see them suffer like that. We’re here to offer a solution,” he said.

The solution: an all-volunteer crew of highly skilled, dedicated divers based out of Channel Islands Harbor who go out on the ocean to find and remove the ghost gear.

In October, ODA worked a debris field left by the wreck of the La Jennelle, a 465-foot-long passenger liner that slammed into the rocks at Silver Strand Beach during a fierce storm in 1970.

The ship's owners had the wreck cut into pieces because they couldn't salvage it.

On Oct. 31, four divers looking for lobster traps worked in 85 feet of water, in a field with many pieces of the ship scattered about. “Wherever these pieces are, growth happens,” Lieber said. “That’s where lobsters like to hang out and the lobster fishermen know that, so they drop their traps here, and we’re here to try to remove the abandoned ones we find.”

Lieber said the debris is called “ghost gear” because the traps kill animals long after they’re abandoned. “They’re killing untold amounts of animals,” he said. Approximately 360,000 tons of ghost gear are lost in the oceans each year.

A few months ago, ODA found two abandoned traps with more than 100 animals stuck in them. One had 45 lobsters in it, said Lieber, who started doing marine conservation work in 1982. “I’ve always been somebody that wants to do something for the ocean.”

Lieber likens cleaning up the bottom of the ocean to being out in a national park like Yosemite or Yellowstone.

“If I see trash there, I clean it up. And I treat the oceans like that,” he said.

For 19 years, Lieber volunteered with major organizations such as Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. In 1999, he found an abandoned trap off Anacapa Island with animals stuck in it. “I set them loose, and when we got back to the boat, everybody was talking about it. Maybe there are like-minded people that want to do something about it,” he thought.

Sea Shepherd donated a boat in 2000, and two years later, ODA obtained nonprofit, 501(c)(3) status.

Its core group of roughly 15 volunteers tries to get out on the ocean every weekend. “But weather conditions play havoc with you. Your best intentions are laid bare when you try to deal with the ocean,” said Lieber, who also founded ODA chapters on Oahu and the Big Island.

On Oahu, 14 divers and 11 crew recently removed 47 tires from Kaneohe Bay in one hour. “That was a mess,” Lieber said. “And there’s four times that to go.”

Lieber, 68, of Ventura, grew up in Chicago but moved to Cleveland when he was 14, where he did some of his first dives in Lake Erie. “That’s what got me empathetic toward fish,” he said. “I still feel like I’m that kid looking for a starfish, snorkeling.”

ODA operates from “Mr. Barker’s LegaSea,” a 54-foot, former sport fishing boat purchased with seed money donated by television game show host and animal advocate Bob Barker.

Lieber knew Barker through Sea Shepherd and asked him for help getting a bigger boat, so Barker donated the money to purchase the vessel.

Operations are funded strictly through donations, Lieber said, and ODA doesn’t apply for government grants. “What we’re doing is too dangerous for the government to want to be a part of,” said Lieber. “Any time you’re down there diving, you just don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Other organizations that do what ODA does use commercial divers that make upward of \$500 an hour. “Our operation costs a tenth of what these other organizations operate on,” said Lieber, who added that ODA has never had an accident.



Ojai Valley News photo by Perry Van Houten

Geoff Walsh, above, a volunteer diver with ODA, steps off the deck of Mr. Barker’s LegaSea on Oct. 31.

ODA’s volunteers come from Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange and Santa Barbara counties. “We have a tight-knit group of people and they just love doing this. They continue coming back, but they don’t mind the drive, because they get to help the oceans,” Lieber said.

Earlier this year, Robert Broesamle of Ojai, an avid diver, reached out to ODA with the locations of some abandoned traps. “About two weeks ago, he removed 25 lobster traps from the break wall at the Ventura Harbor, in one day,” Lieber said. “Everywhere we go, every time we’ve gone to a place he’s recommended, we’re pulling stuff.”

ODA accepts all donations, no matter how small, and though Lieber’s roster of divers is full, there are still ways to volunteer. “Come out and help us. We need people to work on the boat, even if it’s in dock,” he said.

Lieber urged educators to help spread the word. “Get us into your schools, universities and civic groups to give presentations,” he said. “It’s not just a way to raise money, but it’s a way to educate people about the devastation this stuff causes.”

Ventura resident Kim Cardenas, named 2020 ODA Crew Member of the Year, has been volunteering for nearly 10 years and goes out with the group once or twice a month.

“The ocean is just riddled with man-made debris of some kind,” said Cardenas, who loves diving and wanted to do something to help marine life. “I get to do something I love with

a higher purpose. When you attach that lift bag and you stay on the bottom and you watch it go up to the surface, that's the best feeling."



Ojai Valley News photo by Perry Van Houten

Members of the ODA team, left, onboard the LegaSea at Channel Islands Harbor.