

NOAA Marine Science Career - Case Studies

Kathy Chaston - PhD

Coral and Coastal Management Specialist NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program

Protecting corals! Let's meet Dr. Kathy Chaston who is going to tell us about her job as a coral and coastal management specialist. Kathy currently works for NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program

What does a coral and coastal management specialist do?

As part of my job I manage and protect coral reefs so they might survive for years to come. I get to work with coral reef managers, which are people who look after coral reefs, and coral reef scientists. We all work together to learn more about the corals, find out what is damaging them, and figure out how to stop the damage. Areas with polluted water actually make the corals sick. As a coastal management specialist, I have to find a way to stop the pollution and dirt from flowing onto the reef. The waste that washes down streams and storm drains can smother coral reefs. It is part of my job to find ways to help keep trash and waste out of storm drains and waterways, so we can help save our corals.



How did you become interested in protecting corals?

I grew up in Australia where most of my childhood was spent exploring the beach and swimming in the ocean. My parents are nature lovers and have always surrounded me with science. As a teenager, I grew passionate about marine mammals and knew that I wanted to do something to protect their environment. That passion for marine mammals and encouragement from my family lead me to pursue a degree in environmental science at the University of Queensland in Australia. While I was a student there I worked for an environmental consultant for two years and then worked full time with them after graduation. Later my cousin Lem, a marine biologist who was my role model and mentor, encouraged me to pursue my doctoral degree in marine botany. Since earning my PhD, I have worked for a community non-profit organization in Yap, I have been a Coastal Resource Manager in Palau, and I coordinated a coral reef project at the University of Hawaii.



What advice do you have for students who want to work in your field?

If you are willing to explore and have adventures there are many exciting opportunities in this line of work. Be sure to study science, try to volunteer with environmental groups and pursue internships where possible. Then when it comes time to choose a career make sure it is something that you really care about, it makes work so much more fun! That is what I did and my career has allowed me to live and work in many cool places: Australia, Micronesia, and Hawaii. One of the coolest things I have done happened in Palau when I got the chance to swim in a marine lake called ‘Jellyfish Lake’ that was filled with non-stinging jellyfish. Another experience that I will never forget was when I got to swim with a pod of wild dugongs in Moreton Bay, Australia.

What things can students do to protect coral reefs?

One thing people can do to protect coral reefs is to conserve water. The less water you use, the less runoff and wastewater eventually flows into the oceans. Also keep trash and yard waste out of storm drains and waterways because “What’s on the land today could be on our reefs tomorrow”.

