



# ATLANTIC MARINE CONSERVATION SOCIETY

Promoting Marine Conservation Through Action







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## TEAM

Robert A. DiGiovanni, Jr., Founder and Chief Scientist  
Kimberly Durham, Necropsy Program Coordinator  
Allison DePerte, Field Biologist + Research Associate  
Jennifer Lopez, Field Biologist + Volunteer Coordinator  
Erich Dietterle, Field Biologist + Education Coordinator  
Joanne Biegert, Office Administrator

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On the cover: Center for Coastal Studies team adds buoyancy to an entangled humpback whale off of the Ambrose Channel. Permit #18786-04  
Story on Page 8

## FROM OUR FOUNDER/ CHIEF SCIENTIST



*AMSEAS Founder and Chief Scientist Robert A. DiGiovanni, Jr. assesses a deceased humpback whale with AMSEAS biologists Erich Dietterle and Jennifer Lopez*

Dear Friends,

As I sit down to write this, the first thought that comes to mind is "thank you". Thank you to all that believe in our mission and thank you to everyone who continues to believe in us. What a year 2020 has been. I hope you are all adapting to the changes we are facing in our environment. These have been difficult times for all of our friends and families. All of us have felt the pain and suffering this pandemic has brought to our shores.

It is during these times that we turn to our friends and our environment for encouragement. We are all standing together to face these challenges and forging a new path towards normalcy. My belief is that these events will enable us to build on relationships we let fade, take on new challenges we put aside, develop a renewed appreciation for coming together with friends, family, and new acquaintances to build a society that can build for tomorrow.

During these difficult times we are reminded about how much we can come together as a society. Our team at AMSEAS has worked with some amazing dedicated individuals as we continued to respond during this pandemic. It was an honor to be able to stand beside these individuals committed to responding to the challenges and hearing the compassion from all of them. It made me realize even though you may stand on the beach by yourself, we are not alone.

Thanks to friends like you we will be there to answer the call. We will navigate these troubled waters together.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob DiGiovanni'.

Robert A. DiGiovanni, Jr.



# VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT INTRODUCING KRISTEN CONKLIN!

Volunteer Kristen Conklin joined the AMSEAS volunteer team in August of 2019. Kristen is a Biology teacher at Francis Lewis High School (FLHS) in Queens, NY by trade and a dedicated conservation activist in her everyday life. She strives to inspire her students by bringing her passion for nature and conservation into the classroom. This past Earth Day, AMSEAS staff joined Kristen, her students, and other staff members from FLHS for a virtual chat about the wildlife that we can find in our own backyards and how to get involved in marine conservation. Even while maintaining social distancing, we were still able to connect with over 100 people and encourage students to continue to learn about and protect the marine environment.

As an AMSEAS volunteer, Kristen has not only fostered educational conversations with local communities, but has also helped put together several beach cleanups and assisted during several AMSEAS necropsies.

Why volunteer with AMSEAS?

“I hope to have an opportunity to help guide our youth and adults to feeling comfortable with nature and respecting the land that we inhabit. I hope to be a part of carrying out these initiatives out in our community to spread awareness for conservation, preservation and accountability. I look forward to bringing these experiences and knowledge into the classroom to empower high school kids to participate  
-Volunteer Kristen Conklin”

We are truly lucky to have a volunteer like Kristen on our team, and extend our sincerest thank you for her dedication to promoting marine conservation through action!

Join us at [amseas.org/volunteers](https://amseas.org/volunteers)



Kristen leading an educational program at Inwood Hill Park



Kristen and a community volunteer at the Long Beach Community Social Distancing Cleanup



# COMMUNITY ACTION

This year has certainly looked different for our community outreach at AMSEAS, but the changing times have not slowed us down! So far this year, we have conducted a total of 73 programs, reaching almost 2,000 people. We started the year out with our seal cruises on Shinnecock Bay, with six successful cruises. Unfortunately, we had to cancel four of our cruises due to the onset of COVID-19.



Necropsy Program Coordinator Kimberly Durham leads an educational teaching necropsy with Western Suffolk BOCES

We have also continued to foster positive relationships with individuals dedicated to supporting our mission. Kai Tvelia, a sixth grade student from Peconic Community School in Aquebogue, NY showed his enthusiasm for the environment by coming out to a lecture on cold-stunned sea turtles last year. Feeling inspired, Kai pursued his newfound desire to help cold-stunned sea turtles by organizing an AMSEAS presentation at his school to educate his peers about cold-stunning and how they could help with beach monitoring. Kai didn't stop there! Following the presentation, Kai created educational videos about what to do if you find a cold-stunned sea turtle on the beach. With the help of his mom, his videos were shared on social media platforms to spread conservation efforts and to raise awareness. Thanks for all of your hard work and dedication to protecting our wildlife, Kai!



AMSEAS Biologist Jennifer Lopez leads a beach cleanup at Hallock State Park Preserve

The pandemic has encouraged us to pivot and adapt to be able to continue our mission. We were able to convert all of our in-person lectures to virtual presentations, including necropsies! So far we have conducted three virtual teaching necropsies with Western Suffolk BOCES. During one virtual necropsy alone we were able to connect with over 60 people! This would not have been possible with an in-person teaching necropsy. Going virtual has also allowed us to expand our geographic reach during our programs. We have collaborated with groups from the North Fork to Queens, and were even fortunate enough to present for a school in The Colony, Texas!

**Join us at [amseas.org/events](https://amseas.org/events)**



Left: AMSEAS Biologist Erich Dietterle with Kai Tvelia. Right: Thank you cards made by students from Peconic Community School.



# SOCIAL DISTANCING BEACH CLEANUPS

In honor of World Oceans Day 2020 our AMSEAS team joined together with National Geographic Society for a “Debris Tracker Challenge” social distancing beach cleanup with the help of volunteers Kristen Conklin and Scott Kearney. What an incredible turnout! We had a total of 157 individuals join us in cleaning the beach, with a total of 1,248 items of debris collected. To add to the “wow factor” of this wonderful accomplishment, all of this was achieved in the midst of a pandemic while maintaining social distancing on beaches all throughout Long Island.

And it didn’t stop there! Our World Oceans Day cleanup attracted the attention of many enthusiastic patrons in the Long Beach community who wanted to help take steps toward a sustainable future for our environment and its inhabitants by cleaning up the coastline. In response, volunteers Kristen Conklin and Scott Kearney helped to organize a Long Beach Community Social Distancing Beach Cleanup in honor of “Plastic Free July.” Seventy-eight dedicated Long Beach community members came together to collect a total of 1,573 items of debris, weighing in at ~130 lbs. WOW!

We are so inspired by everyone who took the initiative to become a steward of the marine environment and help protect our oceans by participating in these cleanups. We’d like to thank Brixx & Barley of Long Beach for sponsoring both of these cleanups by offering discounts to participants for their hard work, Kristen and Scott for all of their help in making these cleanups happen, and the Town of Hempstead for donating cleanup supplies.

We applaud every one of you, and look forward to joining you at a future cleanup!

**GET** *involved*  
amseas.org





# RESEARCH UPDATE

As part of a two-year project with National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Northeast Fisheries Science Center, Marine Mammals of Maine, and Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, AMSEAS kicked off year two in January 2020 to conduct health assessments of gray seals in the northwest Atlantic. This project is critical in understanding how the species moves throughout the region, providing greater understanding into the ways in which they utilize the marine environment through health assessments and disease surveillance. Funding for the tags used in this project was provided by the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation.

The team's first stop was Muskeget Island off of Nantucket. Despite rough seas and inclement weather, the team successfully deployed 13 satellite tags and captured and sampled 27 pups, which involved collecting weights, body measurements, and biological samples.

The following week the adventure continued as the team headed 250 miles north of Cape Cod to Seal Island National Wildlife Refuge off the coast of Rockland Maine, home of the third largest gray seal pupping colony in the United States.

The first day provided an interesting twist as the team was faced with a seal rescue shortly after arriving on Seal Island. While setting up, crew members were alerted by unusual sounds coming from a small well. To their surprise, they saw the big black eyes of a small seal pup peering up at them when they looked in to investigate the noises. This was not going to be an easy rescue, as the team was now faced with trying to pull up a frightened seal stuck three feet below the surface in putrid water without being bitten. After several unsuccessful attempts, the seal was able to be hoisted up out of the well, after which it spent the rest of the day hauled out, basking in the sun. After the rescue, the team successfully sampled 15 seals and satellite tagged 5 pups.

The last stop was Great Point on Nantucket, where we sampled 15 seals and satellite tagged two animals.

Learn more about this project at:  
[amseas.org/northwest-atlantic-seal-survey](http://amseas.org/northwest-atlantic-seal-survey)



Gray seal pup rescued from well on Seal Island, Maine



AMSEAS Chief Scientist Robert DiGiovanni helps the team collect a weight on a gray seal pup

Continuing this project, in February AMSEAS traveled to Virginia to conduct health assessments on harbor seals. The team sampled and satellite tagged two animals.

With the onset of COVID-19, many of the other research projects AMSEAS had lined up for 2020 had to be postponed. However, we were still able to collaborate with several of our partners on projects tagging rehabilitated marine mammals and sea turtles. In August, our Chief Scientist Robert DiGiovanni satellite tagged a harbor seal pup patient from Marine Mammals of Maine prior to his release. In September, Robert partnered with Sea Turtle Recovery to satellite tag a loggerhead sea turtle patient named Tabitha prior to her release. Learn more about these collaborative efforts by visiting our Facebook page: [Facebook.com/amseasorg](https://www.facebook.com/amseasorg)



Tabitha, a loggerhead sea turtle patient, receives a satellite tag from our Chief Scientist Robert DiGiovanni prior to her release from Sea Turtle Recovery's rehabilitation center



# STRANDING UPDATE



AMSEAS Biologist Erich Dietterle assesses a leatherback sea turtle with evidence of a prior entanglement



AMSEAS Biologist Jennifer Lopez examines a Kemp's ridley sea turtle with evidence of vessel strike

Our team conducts stranding investigations to learn as much as we can about the marine wildlife in our waters. Mortality investigations allow us to gather information about an animal's life history, including its age and sex, how the animal was spending its time in our waters (e.g., what it was eating), and what factors contributed to its death. So far this year, our team has conducted stranding investigations on **59 seals, 46 sea turtles, and 34 cetaceans, ten of which were large whales.**

Unfortunately, with many of these strandings we have documented findings of human interaction, including entanglement in fishing gear, marine debris ingestion, and vessel strike. 50% of the large whales we have responded to this year had evidence of human interaction, consisting of entanglement and vessel strike. This summer alone, 50% of the 34 sea turtles we examined had evidence of human interaction, with vessel strike being the predominant cause of death. Marine mammals and sea turtles come to the surface to breathe, which makes them very vulnerable to vessel strikes.

Please remember that we share our waters with these amazing animals. Go slow and be on the lookout for sea turtles and other marine life while boating, and remember to dispose of any trash and fishing gear responsibly while enjoying the beaches. While our oceans provide us with a great way to beat the heat and enjoy the summer, we must not forget that these waters are home to so many marine animals that need our help. Report sightings of sick, injured, entangled, or deceased marine mammals and sea turtles immediately.

**NYS Stranding Hotline:  
631.369.9829**



AMSEAS Biologist Jennifer Lopez takes measurements of a striped dolphin with assistance from a Jones Beach State Park employee



# DISENTANGLEMENT: A HERCULEAN EFFORT



The CCS Marine Animal Entanglement Response team works to cut through gear entangling a humpback whale in the Ambrose Channel. Photo credit: CCS

In July, our team was part of a 4-day response to help disentangle a humpback whale that had become entangled in fishing gear in New York's Ambrose Channel.

On Monday, July 27 NOAA Fisheries received a report from the U.S. Coast Guard Sector New York regarding a humpback whale that had been observed in distress by recreational boaters. AMSEAS quickly responded with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) to confirm the sighting and assess the animal. Over the next two days responders determined that while the whale was alive and able to breathe, it appeared to be anchored in place by very heavy gear and thus faced the threats of being struck by passing vessels or attacked by predators. Our team quickly relayed this information to NOAA and the Center for Coastal Studies (CCS), the lead authorized disentanglement partner for the area, and all involved parties began to plan for the following day's disentanglement attempt.

On Wednesday morning CCS was flown into NY on a flight donated by Turtles Fly Too. Over the next two days, CCS, with support from the AMSEAS Team, NYSDEC, Army Corps of Engineers, Northeast Fisheries Science Center Sandy Hook Lab, Monmouth University Urban Coast Institute, and NOAA Fisheries worked tirelessly to cut the whale free from the ~4000 lbs of rope, netting, buoys, and steel cables anchoring it to the sea floor.

After two days of Herculean effort, the final cut was made. "The whale is free" echoed over the radio, and all teams breathed a sigh of relief. The whale's condition was monitored as it swam free, and the teams returned back to base.

The CCS Humpback Whale Studies program later identified the whale as the unnamed 2016 calf of Nile, a whale first catalogued by CCS in the Gulf of Maine.

On August 19, Nile's calf was spotted off of Montauk by the Coastal Research and Education Society of Long Island, Inc. (CRESLI) during a whale watch aboard the Viking Fleet. The whale was observed feeding and diving, and the injuries along its tail appeared to be healing well.

This event demonstrated that the successful disentanglement of this animal would not have been possible without the foresight and dedication of a small team working together with all our network partners to give this whale a second chance at life.

This work was conducted under Permit #18786-04, issued to the NOAA Fisheries Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program



© Dr. Artie Kopelman for CRESLI  
Nile's calf spotted feeding and diving by CRESLI. Photo credit: Dr. Artie Kopelman, CRESLI



# 2020 LARGE WHALE STRANDING SUMMARY

SPECIES	STRANDING DATE	LOCATION	CAUSE OF DEATH*
1. Humpback whale	March 31	Far Rockaway, NY	Undetermined
2. Minke whale	May 15	Oyster Bay, NY	Infectious disease
3. Humpback whale	May 22	Westhampton Beach, NY	Analysis ongoing
4. Humpback whale	May 30	Amagansett, NY	Analysis ongoing
5. Minke whale	June 17	Newport, RI	Fisheries interaction
6. North Atlantic Right whale	June 25	Sandy Hook, NJ	Vessel strike
7. Humpback whale	July 17	Montauk, NY	Undetermined
8. Humpback whale	July 18	Mastic Beach, NY	Analysis ongoing
9. Humpback whale	July 27	Rockaway Beach, NY	N/A- *Animal alive and entangled, response was for disentangling
10. Humpback whale	September 16	Ventnor, NJ	Analysis ongoing

AMSEAS is responsible for responding to all large whales that wash up on our shores. Part of our stranding investigations involve collecting samples and sending them to a pathologist for further examination.

\*All causes of death are preliminary. Pathology reports may take several months to come back.

**As a nonprofit organization, we rely on public support to carry out these investigations.  
Please consider making a tax-deductible donation to AMSEAS**



*A deceased humpback whale that washed ashore in Smith Point County Park in July, 2020*



# WHAT'S NEXT



*AMSEAS biologist Jennifer Lopez weighs debris collected during a beach cleanup*

## Cold Stun Sea Turtle Season

Cold stunned sea turtle season is right around the corner! Join AMSEAS for beach monitoring lectures and walks from October through December to help save the sea turtles that may wash up on our shores. Help support the efforts of the New York State Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Stranding Program by joining us in monitoring our beaches. [Find dates at amseas.org/events](https://amseas.org/events).

## Volunteer Training

Interested in helping AMSEAS promote conservation of the marine environment through action? Join us for an information session! We will discuss what our organization does and how you can get involved, including joining our volunteer program, participating in a beach cleanup, attending a lecture, and more. Conservation starts with you! [Find details at amseas.org/events](https://amseas.org/events).

## Fall 2020 and Winter 2021 Internships

AMSEAS is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting marine conservation through action. Some of our action items include data research, surveys and health assessments, involvement in the Specially Trained Animal Response Team (START), response to entangled and out-of-habitat animals, necropsies, beach monitoring, public outreach, and education. We have a number of internship opportunities in which students can become involved with AMSEAS within the marine mammal and sea turtle stranding network. [Learn more at amseas.org](https://amseas.org).

## Seal Cruises Winter 2021

Our popular seal cruises are coming back in winter 2021! Check back for dates and details at [amseas.org/events](https://amseas.org/events).





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"INDIVIDUALLY,  
WE ARE ONE  
DROP. TOGETHER,  
WE ARE AN  
OCEAN."

RYUNOSUKE SATORO

Thank you to all of our partners for helping us promote marine conservation through action!

Army Corps of Engineers | Center for Coastal Studies | Citizens Campaign For the Environment  
| International Fund for Animal Welfare | Long Island Community Foundation | Marine  
Mammals of Maine | Marine Mammal Stranding Center | Mystic Aquarium | Naval Facilities  
Engineering Command Atlantic | New York City Parks | New York State Parks and Connect  
Kids to Parks | National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries | New York State  
Department of Environmental Conservation | Northeast Fisheries Science Center | Sea Turtle  
Recovery | Tufts University Runstadler Lab | US Coast Guard ...and all of the towns and  
municipalities that have supported our response efforts!