

MARINE DEBRIS REMOVAL INITIATIVE RETURNS TO THE GREAT BEAR RAINFOREST COASTLINE

Small Ship Tour Operators set a new course during tourism season to clean up British Columbia's coast

Victoria, BC – August 15, 2024 — For the first time since the Marine Debris Removal Initiative (MDRI) began when the pandemic halted tourism, Small Ship Tourism Operators (SSTOA) members Maple Leaf Adventures and Bluewater Adventures have returned to their mission to clean up marine debris from British Columbia's remote coastline.

Working with local Indigenous nations, they have just completed the clean up of 32.5 tonnes of debris comprising of fishing gear, nets, rope, polystyrene floats, plastic bottles, and more—exceeding their target of 30 tonnes. This marine debris, if not removed, poses significant threats to BC's ecosystems, breaking down into microplastics or entangling wildlife such as humpback whales.

This clean up adds to the over 327 tonnes they cleaned up in the previous two expeditions in 2020 & 2021. This year's effort was uniquely redesigned to fit within the middle of their tourism season. Thanks to the skill and passion of 48 crew members aboard three expedition vessels—Maple Leaf, Cascadia, and Island Roamer—the team achieved remarkable cost and carbon footprint efficiencies compared to previous initiatives. Funded by the BC government's Clean Coast, Clean Waters (CCCW) program, the cleanup area once again targeted the Great Bear Rainforest and Great Bear Sea region, encompassing marine and terrestrial protected areas, critical habitats for whales, seabirds, and sea otters, and dozens of islands. This region has earned global appeal for its nature-based tourism offerings.

The region's remoteness—only accessible by watercraft—added complexity, requiring advanced maritime knowledge, skills, and wilderness expertise; along with movable, remote infrastructure for housing, storage, transport, communications, and supplies.

Leadership from the Heiltsuk, Kitasoo Xai'xais, and Gitga'at Nations collaborated with the expedition to remove debris from important cultural sites in coastal regions surrounding Bella Bella, Klemtu and Hartley Bay, as part of the project. Heiltsuk Integrated Resource Management Department (HIRMD) in Bella Bella, home of the Heiltsuk Nation, sent out 19 Heiltsuk youth and youth leaders. Also,

three boats and eight Hartley Bay community members worked alongside Cascadia and Island roamer crews at the Moore Island group.

Bridgemans Services Group provided essential support in offloading and processing the marine debris after collection. From there, 80% of the marine debris was transported to Ocean Legacy Foundation and KUTE (Kitimat Understanding The Environment) to be recycled.

Both Maple Leaf Adventures and Bluewater Adventures—members of the Small Ship Tour Operators Association (SSTOA) and Wilderness Tourism Association (WTA)—provide small-scale expedition cruises that give guests weeklong experiences among the wildlife, cultural history and landscapes of the coast. They operate in the Vancouver Island, Haida Gwaii, Alaska, and Great Bear Rainforest regions, and their low-impact, high-value experiences that benefit both visitors and local communities.

As world-recognised practitioners of sustainable tourism, both companies regularly incorporate coastal care into their expeditions. Since returning to operating trips with guests, the companies provide educational talks from leaders of the initiative which inspire guests to make change in their own way, regularly taking part in voluntary beach clean ups during their time aboard.

By integrating marine debris removal into a peak tourism season, the companies aimed to show how coastal protection and environmental stewardship can become just another part of doing business in British Columbia.

Quotes:

-Kevin Smith, Expedition Leader and President of Maple Leaf Adventures:
“This is like a slow-motion oil spill onto our coast, that harms shorelines and wildlife. Ever since the completion of the 2021 project, we have wanted to return to continue this critical work. To us, it’s not done until whales stop being entangled, plastic stops breaking down on beaches and seabirds are out of danger of ingesting plastic. As eco-tourism operators, doing this work as part of travel is what to us the future of tourism looks like.”

- Randy Burke, Captain and Director of Bluewater Adventures: “After 50 years operating nature tours on this coast, Bluewater Adventures understands how deeply inter-connected the health of the ocean is to wildlife survival, visitor experience and First Nations’ futures. This expedition cleaning up marine debris is an example

of how business needs to be responsible for their actions and our common future. If we don't get involved giving back, we really can't justify the impacts our small group expeditions actually do have."

- Katherine MacRae, Wilderness Tourism Association President:
'The WTA is once again a proud supporter of the SSTOA's continued dedication to our coast, regenerative tourism and the wildlife who inhabit these remote coastal areas. We are forever grateful to the Heiltsuk, Kitasoo Xai'xais, and Gitga'at Nations for their continued support and partnership in this important work.'

Join the Movement: The SSTOA invites media, industry partners, and the public to follow updates from the MDRI 2024: #BCCoastalCleanup, and #CleanCoastsCleanWaters with mentions of [@mapleleafadvent](#), [@bluewateradventures](#), and [@wildernesstourismassociation](#).

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Background on the Marine Debris Removal Initiative:

The Marine Debris Removal Initiative began in 2020 when a fleet of tourism ships embarked on an unprecedented, six-week expedition to the Great Bear Rainforest's outer coast. This project, funded by the provincial Ministry of Environment & Climate Change Strategy, aimed to remove between 75 and 100 tons of marine waste, including plastics, from up to 1,000 km of coastal beaches. Indigenous leaders in the region supported the initiative, emphasizing its significance for sustaining ocean health and protecting community food harvests.

In 2021, the initiative continued with similar objectives, further reinforcing the commitment of BC small ship tour companies to environmental stewardship. These expeditions provided work for over 100 crew and guides, supported local economies, and highlighted the importance of addressing marine debris as part of global efforts under the Oceans Plastic Charter and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The record success of the 2020 and 2021 expeditions set the foundation for future MDRI efforts across BC, demonstrating the critical role of collaborative, large-scale environmental projects in preserving the natural beauty and ecological integrity of British Columbia's coastlines. With tourism returning as we came out of the pandemic, the spirit of the MDRI lived on with guests taking part in voluntary beach clean ups during their trips—and now, there is hope this initiative will become a part of every operating season.

About the Small Ship Tour Operators Association (SSTOA):

The Small Ship Tour Operators Association (SSTOA) is a coalition of small ship tour operators dedicated to promoting sustainable and regenerative travel along British Columbia's coast. By integrating environmental conservation into their operations, SSTOA members strive to protect the natural beauty and ecological integrity of the regions they explore with guests.

For more information visit <https://www.wilderness-tourism.bc.ca/sstoa>

About the Wilderness Tourism Association (WTA):

The Wilderness Tourism Association of BC (WTA) is a non-profit organization that provides leadership, advocacy, stewardship, education and marketing support to wilderness-based tourism operators. Our members represent a wide range of iconic, world-class wilderness tourism experiences across BC, from multi-day expeditions and wildlife tours to remote ranches and luxury resorts. The WTA community, which includes Maple Leaf Adventures and Bluewater Adventures, is a powerful network of eco-tourism leaders, each with a unique story and connection to the land.

For more information visit <https://www.wilderness-tourism.bc.ca/>

About the Clean Coast, Clean Waters (CCCW):

As part of the Clean Coast, Clean Waters (CCCW), the Province is investing \$8 million for 17 more projects this year in collaboration with small businesses, non-profit organizations and First Nations to tackle marine debris and plastic pollution along B.C.'s coastlines, while supporting economic development and jobs for people. The CCCW initiative is part of the CleanBC Plastics Action Plan to reduce pollution from plastic waste.

For more information visit <https://bccleancoast.ca/>

Media Assets and Further Details

High-resolution images are available at

<https://mapleleafadventures.smugmug.com/Public/Presskit/Images/Marine-Debris-Removal-Initiative/2024>

B-roll footage, and additional information about the MDRI 2024 are available upon request.