

Meet Brynn Baker, a landlocked Iowan joining a voyage to study plastic pollution in oceans

[Donnelle Eller](#), Des Moines Register Published 12:01 p.m. CT Jan. 1, 2020 | Updated 11:09 a.m. CT Jan. 5, 2020

This story is part of the Des Moines Register's People to Watch in 2020 series. The stories highlight Iowans we expect great things from in the coming year.

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As Brynn Baker watched, Mid America Recycling workers pulled a frying pan, microwave door, plastic window shade and a bag of tampons and other trash from the fast-moving stream of plastics, paper, cardboard, tin and glass destined to be remade into new products.

The east Des Moines recycling center that Baker recently toured is a long way from Australia, where next summer she will join a team of women studying plastic pollution in the oceans. The solutions, however, to the problems posed by the 5 trillion plastic fragments in the world's seas begin on land with people who live in places like Iowa.

"People feel very disconnected from the problem. It's out of sight, out of mind, especially in landlocked places like Iowa," said Baker, the rare Iowan to be chosen for eXXpedition, an all-women crew of scientists and others with interest in the field.

Baker hopes to bring the issue home to Iowa.



Members of a past eXXpedition voyage place trackers on debris. (Photo: Contributed/eXXpedition)

"The first step is really just about putting the reality of it right in front of people and hope they'll choose to change," said Baker, who will join the 14th leg of eXXpedition Round the World, a series of 30 voyages that will cover 38,000 nautical miles with an ever-changing crew of volunteers over two years. She is one of The Des Moines Register's "15 People to Watch in 2020."

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After her 12-day trip, the 34-year-old writer and editor plans to write about the crew — a diverse mix of women from across the globe — and the science for both young and adult audiences.

The mother of three works full-time at Meredith Corp., where she's a senior content manager for Better Homes & Gardens, Real Simple and Martha Stewart Living magazines. She also freelances, writing historical, science and nature books for middle schoolers.

Baker first became interested in plastic pollution seven years ago while living in Alaska. Baker said she was kayaking and whale watching with her husband in Prince William Sound when they discovered a mass of "ghost nets" that fishermen had abandoned or lost.



An eXXpedition crew uses a manta trawl to collect samples. (Photo: Contributed/Jen Russell and eXXpedition)

The nets, which take decades to deteriorate, can damage coral reefs and trap sea turtles, dolphins and other aquatic life. Scientists say abandoned fishing gear makes up a good portion of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a vast agglomeration of plastic and floating trash halfway between Hawaii and California.

It extends for more than 600,000 square miles, which is twice the size of Texas and the largest collection of plastic in the world's oceans.

"We'd see plastic just floating there with the icebergs. It frustrated me and shook me to my core," Baker said. "That was the first time I was aware of plastics in the ocean."

Deciding to apply for 'a long shot'

The Minnesota native decided to apply in March for eXXpedition after seeing a call for applicants while she was researching stories for International Women's Day.

She applied without telling anyone. "I thought it was a long shot, and I didn't want anyone to think I was crazy," Baker said.



An eXXpedition crew gathers plastic samples. (Photo: Contributed/Eleanor Church Lark Rise Pictures)

She underwent a half-dozen or so interviews before being chosen from 10,000 applicants.

The work that the 300 volunteer women do on eXXpedition contributes to hundreds of research projects across the world, she said.

The crew researches microplastics — plastics that sunlight and waves over time have weakened and beaten into tiny pieces. Microplastics create a cloudy soup on top of the oceans that fish and other aquatic life ingest. Not only does that harm them, but it can spread toxins into the human food chain.

Researchers are especially concerned about chemicals in plastics that are endocrine disruptors, which can affect women's reproductive health, Baker said.

"We need to know what types of plastics are being mismanaged, where they are coming from, how they are circulating through currents, where they are settling, and how it's affecting the planet before we can come up with any solutions that will work," she said.

She said some of the work she will do with eXXpedition involves determining the most common types of single-use plastics, such as those used to make disposable forks, coffee lids and water bottles, that are showing up in the ocean, and bringing that information home to consumers.

Baker said becoming a mother — her boys are 11, 10 and 6 — launched her concern about plastics. "I've really worked to educate myself, once I became a mom, and really began worrying about what I'm feeding my kids, and what products I was purchasing, realizing how much packaging was on them, and how many chemicals are in the packaging," she said.

A call to recycle 'imperfectly'

Anna Pattison, who works with Baker at Meredith, said she had no doubt her co-worker would be chosen for the trip, given her passion for the environment. One day, for example, she dragged a bag of cans to her desk that others had thrown away. She had rinsed them out to be recycled.

"She's dedicated — every single day," Pattison said, adding that Baker's passion rubs off on those around her.

Baker has mostly eliminated her plastic use, but added that even small changes can make a big difference. "We don't need a few people to go zero waste and do it perfectly," she said. "We need millions of people to do it imperfectly, making little changes, such as ending their use of plastic bags."

Only about 8% of all plastic in the United States is recycled, according to a 2017 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency report. And the percentage declines when it comes to plastic bags: Only about 1% of 14 billion plastic shopping bags used in the United States are recycled, Waste Management reports.

Baker said she believes telling the stories of the eXXpedition's citizen and professional scientists and showing how plastics hurt birds, whales and other sea creatures will help change consumers' minds and hearts.

"We want to give them the facts, give them the stories, make it personal," she said. "I want to build an army of change-makers and eco-warriors."

15 People to Watch in 2020: [These lowans are working for good in the new year](#)

Recycling at home

Scott Emery calls the plastic bags, iron pans and plastic window shades "wishful recycling," or trash that workers at Mid America Recycling must pull from a fast-moving conveyor belt that runs in front of them.

Emery, the Mid America Recycling general manager, said about 20% of the material coming into the east Des Moines plant falls into that category and is destined for the landfill.

It needs to be removed so the recyclable plastic, tin, glass, paper and cardboard that comes into the plant is "as clean as possible," Emery said. That's needed so North American manufacturers can use the material to make new products.

It's not too hard for plastic bottles and containers in landlocked cities to end up in oceans, said Mick Barry, Mid America's president. They get blown into storm drains and make their way into rivers and streams that feed the world's oceans. Plastics and other debris can get caught in gyres, a large system of circular ocean currents.

"Look at the streets, and you'll see plastics everywhere," Barry said.

About 'People to Watch'

The Des Moines Register's "15 People to Watch in 2020" are movers and shakers, givers and doers. They were chosen by Des Moines Register news staff from scores of reader nominations. Their stories ran in the Register from Dec. 22 through Jan. 5.

Get to know Brynn Baker

- **NAME:** Brynn Baker
- **BORN:** November 1985 near Oakdale, Minn., where she grew up
- **RESIDENCE:** Waukee
- **EDUCATION:** Bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Minnesota
- **OCCUPATION:** Digital content editor at Meredith Corp. for Better Homes & Gardens, Martha Stewart Living and Real Simple; freelance children's book author at Capstone Publishing
- **CLAIM TO FAME:** Baker was chosen from 10,000 applicants to participate in eXXpedition Round the World, a series of 30 voyages that will cover 38,000 nautical miles with an ever-changing crew of 300 volunteers over two years.
- **FAMILY:** Husband, Kyle Baker; sons Jaedyn, 11, Jaxyn, 10, and Behr, 6

Baker must raise about \$6,000 to participate in the trip, plus the airfare to Australia. [Find out more on Facebook.](#)

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