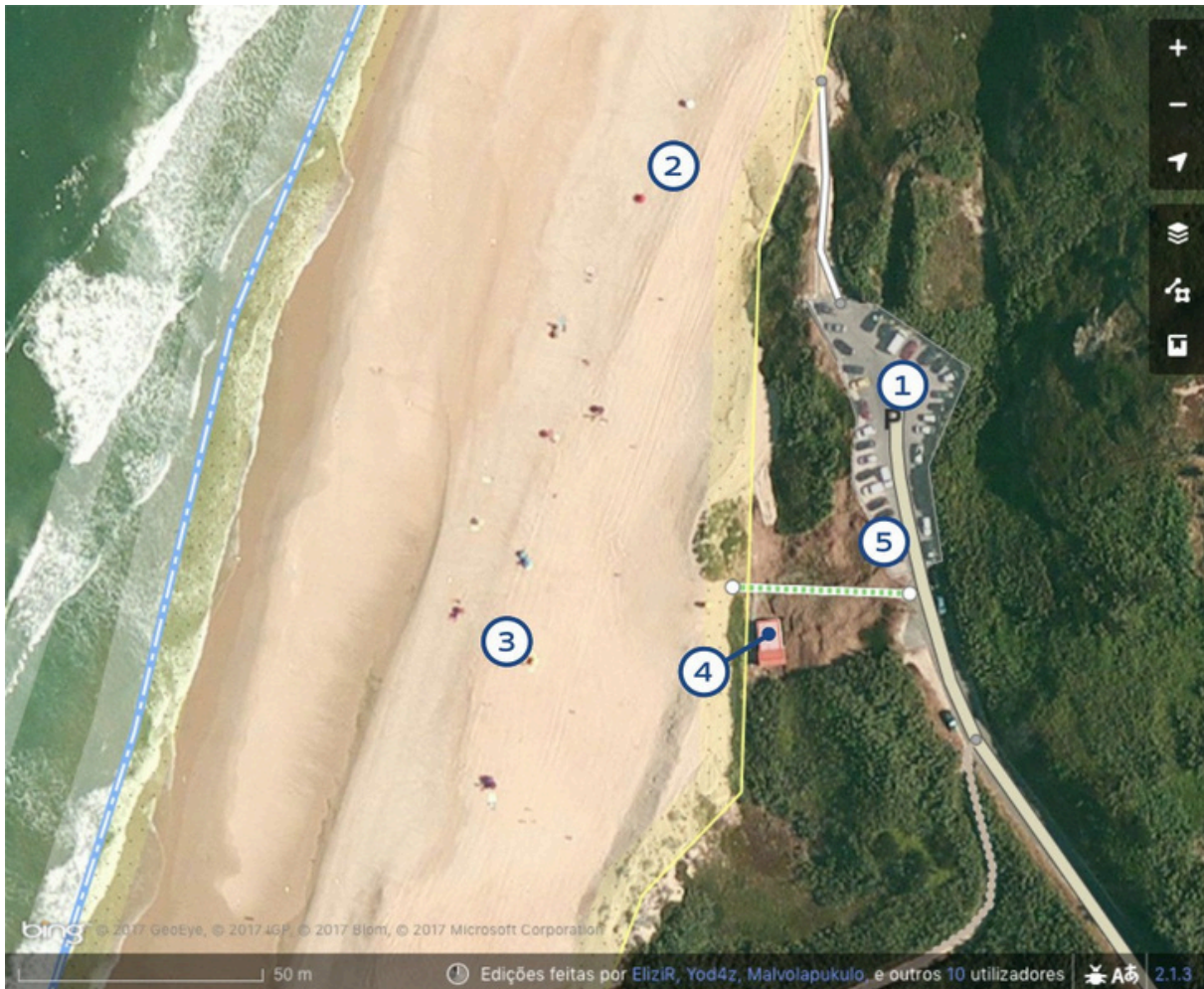




How to organize a litter clean-up

This is a guide to organizing a litter clean-up event with a group of people, with no special skills – but lots of enthusiasm! It's intended to develop community involvement in a specific place through simple but meaningful action.

We offer this guide in good faith, trusting you will ensure the safety and legality of your own actions. A Rocha International, and all other A Rocha organizations, accept no liability for anything you do with this guide. If you have any questions regarding this agreement, please see our contact details at the end of this document.



Clean-up location showing the 1) meeting point, 2) start point, 3) end point, 4) where to sort the litter and 5) where to deposit the litter, awaiting pick-up by the local rubbish collection agency.

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1. Waste and litter

Waste is any substance which is thrown away because we have no use for it. For instance:

- it was defective and never got used
- it was designed as a single-use item
- it became useless, worn-out or broken
- it was an undesired item.

Waste is disposed of in many ways. For instance:

- sorting and recycling some of it;
- depositing it in a landfill;
- burning it for energy;
- exporting it to another country

Your event check list:

- gardening gloves
- litter bags
- litter pickers (optional)
- first-aid kit
- SHARPS container
- separate containers (e.g. for cigarette tips)
- camera or phone
- list of participants
- litter monitoring form
- pen or pencil
- any monitoring equipment (e.g. measuring tape)

All of these options have serious environmental and social implications, so the ideal is to produce as little waste as possible, including consuming less and finding new uses for old things.

Litter is solid waste that has been left at an inappropriate location. It may have been lost or left there by accident, dumped there on purpose, or carried by nature (wind, rivers, waves etc.). This is a growing problem: an estimated four to five million tonnes of waste are generated each day, and 30% of it remains uncollected, thus becoming litter¹. That's 15 to 19 tonnes of litter, or the weight of ten large cars, each second.

Litter can pose serious health issues for people. It harms wildlife and spoils the beauty of a place. It invites indifference, more litter and even crime. Someone should be doing something, right? But, why you? If you didn't put litter there yourself, why should you pick it up? Here are some good reasons:

- it's easy, fun and anyone can help
- it will transform the views of people in your group towards litter
- it's a practical way to love your neighbour and your neighbourhood
- it can lead to all kinds of other actions that yield more permanent solutions
- it can make people love their place better, and appreciate the beauty that was there all along
- if you love nature and/or love God the Creator, then you know it's the right thing to do!

Are you motivated? Then let's start planning!

2. Before the date

Your clean-up event will work out better if you are able to get organized ahead of time. This may be as much as several months in advance.

2.1 Pick a location

Any place with litter can be cleared, whether public or private land. Remember you are just getting started, so pick a simple challenge! The best location would be a place you and others love, that's easy to access and easy to clean up.

Here are some suggestions of places:

- The seaside: Marine litter is a huge problem. Most beaches, no matter how clean they look, have rubbish: deposited there directly, dropped off boats, and carried there by sewers, rivers, the wind and the ocean. Plastics can cause long-lasting waste which becomes increasingly difficult to clean, as they break down into microplastics which make their way into the bodies of animals and even people. (For a fuller explanation and a free Microplastics Toolbox, please visit bit.ly/PlasticsToolbox)
- The riverside: Most rivers flow to the ocean – and litter will flow with it. Once it's in the sea, who knows where it will end up? You can have an impact in faraway places just by cleaning up a stretch of your local river!
- An urban location, such as a park, a street or an empty lot: Litter affects quality of life, morale, and even property prices. You can transform a whole community just by picking up litter! More people will see your group and your action.

1 [Waste Atlas](#), tab 'Global Waste Clock'.

- Farmland: Do you want to support a local farmer? 95% of farmers in the UK have cleared other people's rubbish from their land.² Isolated locations in the countryside are often used for illegally dumping large items of rubbish such as tyres, electrical appliances and construction materials. Why not ask a local farmer if you may organize a clean-up on their land?
- A protected area. You can enlist the protected area wardens – if there are any! Some protected areas exist only on paper, but your group can change this, if you start protecting it yourselves.
- Mountains: there is often litter on hiking trails, and on ski resorts once the snow has melted.



2.2 Pick a date (or two)

Pick a date when you will be available yourself, and keep your diary clear. It might be worth coming up with a couple of alternatives to give your supporters some options too.

You may want to schedule the clean-up around a significant date such as a public holiday or international celebration. Listing your clean-up as part of a larger effort or celebration can be very encouraging, and may help you get more people involved. Here are some significant dates:

- The Ocean Conservancy's International Coastal Cleanup (third Saturday in September)
- World Cleanup Day (third Saturday in September)
- World Wetlands Day (2 February)
- International Day of Forests (21 March)
- World Water Day (22 March)
- Microvolunteering Day (15 April)
- World Heritage Day (18 April), for UNESCO World Heritage Sites
- Earth Day (22 April)
- World Malaria Day (25 April), a good time to remove litter which breeds mosquitoes in tropical regions
- World Parks Week (1st week of May), for urban parks
- Let's Clean Up Europe (usually in May)
- International Day for Biological Diversity (22 May)
- World Environment Day (5 June)
- World Oceans Day (8 June)
- International Youth Day (12 August)
- Season of Creation (1 September – 5 October), if your group is Christian
- Marine Litter Watch Month (from mid-September to mid-October, in the European Union)
- World Tourism Day (27 September), good for touristic places
- International Walk to School Month (October; also other dates nationally) – why not walk with a group of students to their school, picking up any piece of litter you find? ☒
- World Habitat Day (first Monday in October), good for urban places
- World Food Day (16 October)
- World Fisheries Day (21 November)
- World Soil Day (5 December)
- International Mountain Day (11 December)

² Eccleston, Paul. *Litter and fly-tipping facts* The Telegraph, 16 April 2008.

You may also look for environmental or litter organizations in your country: get in touch, or visit their websites or social media to see what they're planning. For instance, in the UK [Surfers Against Sewage](#) promote beach cleans, especially in Spring and Autumn.

2.3 Develop a core group

Your core group is made up of people you already know, and who are motivated to do a clean-up. They are very important:

- they can help you plan the event
- they will ensure that the event will happen, even if you cannot reach out to anyone else
- they will in turn invite their own friends

Create a participant list. Write your own name at the top! There should be space for the person's name, contact info and any notes, such as which dates suit them (if you're offering a choice).

For now, you should ask people who are more likely to say 'yes': relatives, friends and colleagues who can easily get to the site. If this is not your first clean-up, also invite previous participants.

Try recruiting some people to help you organize the event; ideally people you've already worked with. You want as many core people as possible, but it's best to limit the number of organizers to three or four, because large meetings can be less productive.

If you find another person willing to do a litter clean-up with you, congratulations: you have a core group! If you struggle to develop a core group, either postpone your date and keep searching for likeminded people, or continue planning and look for a core group from among those who attend the first event.



Friends of A Rocha Singapore during the International Coastal Cleanup, 2022

2.4 Get permission

Please be careful not to represent A Rocha or any other organization without proper written consent

It's a good idea to tell the local government (municipality, county, city council etc.) about your litter clean-up. Try to talk face to face with the person responsible for that area. They may know of other people interested in cleaning up. They might even agree to help you out with equipment such as litter sacks. Ask them:

- if the place and date are suitable
- if any more permissions or notifications are needed
- how to sort the litter for pick-up, where you can leave it, and when they will pick it up
- if they have supplies they can give or lend, such as gardening gloves and litter bags
- if they would provide transportation to and from the event, if the clean-up is out of town
- if they can publicize the event via their media channels;
- if they have any other tips for you.

If the clean-up location is private, or you must pass through private land, ask the owner's permission as well. Tell them about the aims of your group, why you picked that place, and the proposed date and time. Ask them for any help they can offer, such as volunteers, litter bags and litter transport. If you're in a protected area, you should get permission from the area managers as well. Always listen to people. If they have any objections, try understanding why and looking for solutions together. Be prepared to adjust the place or date if necessary.



2.5 Plan a safe event

Safety is your first concern; picking litter, taking photos and having fun come second.

Visit the clean-up location and plan the event there. Identify the particular places:

1. where people will meet up (including where they will park if necessary)
2. where the clean-up will start
3. where it will end, if applicable (e.g. if you're cleaning up a stretch of 100 metres)
4. where the litter will be sorted
5. where the litter will be deposited awaiting pick-up

If the location is out of town, note down travel time and directions. You may want to set up a central place in town where people will meet and car pool; e.g. '9 am in town, in front of City Hall, or 9.30 am at the beach parking lot'.

Set the start and end times for the event. Remember to set aside time for people to arrive, for an introduction, for the actual clean-up, for sorting the litter and for debriefing/farewell. Don't make the event too long; people should be able to do meaningful work but not be too tired by the end of it. Go with what works in your culture; two to three hours (plus travel time) is a good general suggestion.

The time of day should be the most comfortable for your volunteers. Avoid very cold and very hot hours but it needs to be daylight. You will probably want to start your activity in the morning; in warm climate, remember the day will become hotter as you go. If you're cleaning up the seaside, check the tides for that day; you may want to start around low tide, so you can safely clean up the high tide mark and above.

Anticipate any problems. As you look around the clean-up location, note down the likeliness of any issues, and consider what you will do to manage the risk: either to completely prevent it, or to have a plan in case it happens. Try having a first-aid kit.

Will people need a jacket against the rain or wind? Will they need any special footwear, such as walking boots or rubber boots? If so, make sure to let them know in your event promotion materials. Avoid dangerous litter. What is considered 'dangerous' varies from one situation to another; however, please NEVER handle the following:

- asbestos, which is sometimes found in demolition waste: it releases fibres which if inhaled are a major cause of lung cancer
- explosive, radioactive or corrosive materials (e.g. car batteries)
- very heavy objects (e.g. cars, refrigerators)
- dead animals, in particular marine mammals: they can accumulate high amounts of contaminants in their body fat
- invasive plants: removing them requires a different strategy and often a permit
- anything considered illegal to handle in your country, or which needs a special permit that you do not have

Handle very carefully:

- rusty metal, broken glass, and fishing lines (potentially with fish hooks!)
- sharp objects such as needles (and only you have a sharps container)
- biomedical and organic waste.

Avoid dangerous situations, including:

- crime or violence: if you want to clean up in a place where there's danger of this, you should ensure the safety of your volunteers by getting previous support from the local community
- steep slopes – danger of falling and landslides
- the low-tide zone of beaches, where waves may reach you, or the tide come in while you are cleaning
- near rivers, be careful with slippery rocks, strong currents and flash floods;
- roadside traffic – never clean up motorways or highways where pedestrians are prohibited

Avoid health risks, including:

- heatstroke – avoid very warm weather, and carry a reusable water bottle;
- back pain and equilibrium issues – people who have problems bending down and up should use a litter picker, or be assigned to other tasks, such as photographing the event or carrying litter bags
- contact with poisonous or irritant plants or animals, such as jellyfish

2.6 Divide the work

Which types of litter are so frequent that they merit special collection? Which people would be better assigned to a specific role? Here are some ideas:

- Security Officer. One person should not collect any litter, but look out for any dangers (tides, people straying, unsupervised children etc.), and carry the first-aid kit. This person should ideally be trained in giving first aid; if there's nobody, a good long-term plan would be to encourage someone from your core group to take first-aid training.
- Sharps Officer. If you decide to collect sharps, these should be collected separately into a proper sharps disposal bin, or a sturdy container with a tightly-closing lid, clearly labelled SHARPS. The Sharps Officer can go ahead of the clean-up crew and see if they find anything. Every time someone else finds a sharp, they must not pick it up, but call the Sharps Officer (for instance by calling out 'Sharps!' and raising their hand) to come and carefully collect it.
- Photographer / videographer: one person could just be taking photos or video.
- Cigarette Tip Officers. Assign a person or two to collect cigarette tips into plastic bottles. You may do the same for any other very common litter on site, such as beverage cans, plastic pellets or pieces of rope.
- Visual Artists. Are there any artistic souls in your group? What can they create with the litter they find on the day? Amaze yourselves with your creativity, and share any photos with us!

If you still have a large general group, you may want to divide them into work parties of four to eight people. You should ensure everyone has meaningful work to do, without getting in each other's way. Consider in advance what you'll do if you get 'too many' people. Several options are:

- Limit participation to a certain number of people you can manage; you should still collect any other people's contact details, so you can get in touch for next clean-up.
- Split the participants into two groups, with one group starting at the starting point and the other starting at the end point. The two groups should meet more or less half way.
- Split the participants into several groups starting from the starting point in different directions. Define a closing time and a meeting point (possibly the litter collection point). Each group should have their own safety officer, who may also keep an eye on the clock. Inform the different groups whether their litter should be counted.



Photo credit: Júlio Gaspar Reis

2.7 Think about insurance

Do you need insurance? Maybe it's mandatory where you live, or you may want to contract insurance anyway. If you're on private land, maybe you are automatically insured by the owner; please check with her/him.

Contracting insurance normally involves sending a list of participants' names (sometimes also their identity numbers and dates of birth) to the insurance broker some time before the event begins (e.g. on the previous day), finding the funds (either by charging each participant or by finding a sponsor), making the appropriate payment and 'closing registrations' sometime before the event.

If there's an A Rocha organization in your country, you could ask them to help you arrange your event. It doesn't hurt to ask, but be aware that litter clean-ups may not be a priority for them, or that they may have additional requests, such as requiring a written risk assessment.

Insurance is not usually mandatory if the event is organized informally, and/or if each participant accepts complete legal responsibility for themselves and any minors they bring along. Whatever the terms of insurance or non-insurance, you should inform all of the participants before the event begins.

2.8 Confirm the event with your core group

You have now decided the date, time and meeting point(s) for the clean-up; figured out the equipment each person should bring; and you've thought about risks and adequate coverage. Get in touch with each person in your core group, confirming the meeting point location(s), date and time, whether it changed or not from the previously agreed details. If there's more than one possible meeting point, ask them which one they'll be at and write this down in the volunteer list. Tell each person what they will need to bring:

- a pair of gardening gloves (unless you're supplying these)
- their own drinking water
- adequate protection against the sun, heat or cold
- appropriate footwear
- optional: a litter picker (unless you're supplying this)



Ask your core group to invite their friends, family and colleagues. Which brings us to the following...

2.9 Get the word out

It's time to find more volunteers! Ask any friends, family and colleagues if they want to join in. Inform them clearly about the date, start and closing time, and any required equipment.

Never sign up a child without a proper guardian: someone they know, who will watch over them at all times. Never sign up an older minor (e.g. a teenager) without talking to their parents and getting explicit consent, including photographic consent: never take pictures of children without their parents' or guardian's consent, especially close-up pictures (or video).

Try advertising the event near the place. Is there a pub or restaurant near the location? You could create a small poster with the name and picture of the place you will be cleaning up; the date and time of the event; any necessary equipment each person should bring; whether signing up is mandatory, or if people can just show up at the meeting point(s); and your name and contact information.

Announce your event in any groups you belong to, where appropriate, such as your church or local natural history society. Take the participant list or a sign-up sheet with you.



Ask your local government to advertise the clean-up using their channels: website, internal and/ or external mailing lists, etc.

Send a short email advertising the event to any potentially interested people. If you don't have a mailing list, start one now! Do not spam people: ask people if they are interested in getting emails for your activities.

Inform your local newspaper, radio station etc. Why not ask them to come and report on what you are doing? This might inform and inspire others.

Set up an event on Facebook, if you're on it. You can also use other social media, blogs etc. Don't worry too much about promoting your event online to a general audience; invest in individual contacts. Most of your participants will be friends invited personally, and previous participants.

2.10 Connect with a litter monitoring effort

This is optional, but your clean-up will be twice as useful if you record the different types of litter you find. To reduce litter at its source, we need to know what it is and who's producing it and get all that data together so we can then talk to the industry and find ways of producing less waste.

Find a national or international monitoring effort and familiarize yourself with their recording requirements, which will include at least:

- the name and GPS coordinates of the location
- the distance covered, time spent and size of the cleaning party
- number of items collected and/or weight, divided by a number of categories

As an example, the European Environment Agency has created the Marine Litter Watch programme, for cleaning up and monitoring litter across the seashores, rivers and lakes of Europe. Their free smartphone app (available for [Android](#) and [iOS](#)) can be used to record the litter collected. The data is shared with the Ocean Conservancy's global database.

Are you planning a coastal clean-up in a European seashore, river or lake? Then please join Marine Litter Watch and the A Rocha community there. After you download the Marine Litter Watch app and before you record your clean-up data, under 'Communities' please look for A Rocha and join us. You will need the access code ESWRR.

Get any additional equipment necessary for the litter monitoring; for instance, if you should report on metres of rope, you will need a measuring tape. If litter should be weighed, try to arrange that with the local authority as they normally have scales.

2.11 In case you need to cancel the event

If for some serious reason you can't be there, maybe one of your core group organizers can lead it.

Check the weather report a few days before the event. A little rain will probably not be a problem. If weather conditions completely prevent the activity from happening, you should try to contact everyone as soon as possible to tell them the activity is cancelled. If you cannot, you should be present at the clean-up location and all pick-up points to tell any volunteers the activity has been cancelled, and why.

3. On the date

This is the list of things you should take to the event:

- gardening gloves for any volunteers that might show up without their own, or for everyone if you've agreed to supply this
- litter bags
- litter pickers (optional)
- a first-aid kit
- a sturdy container with a tightly-closing lid, clearly labelled SHARPS
- separate containers for certain litter (e.g. cigarette tips)
- a camera, or a phone with which to take photos
- the list of participants
- the litter monitoring form
- pen or pencil
- any other equipment needed for litter monitoring (e.g. measuring tape)



Photo credit: Dan Tay

3.1 Introduce the activity

Smile! Welcome everybody, and let each person introduce themselves. Check each name in your list of participants, noting down any new names. Inquire about anyone on your list that hasn't arrived yet, to find out if they're coming.

Explain your goals for the day. Tell them where and when the clean-up will begin and end. Go over the basic safety issues, and make sure these are understood. Assign any special roles such as Security Officer.

Do not overdo the talking: remember, people volunteered to do a clean-up. Answer any questions that have to do with the clean-up. There'll be more time for other questions at the end.



3.2 Collect the litter

Finally, you can start cleaning up! Make sure people are following the safety instructions.

Keep an eye on the clock, to make sure there'll be time to sort the litter.

Wood debris is not usually removed.

If you are on a beach, make sure you check the wrack line and, if there is seaweed, pay attention to any debris, such as wet-wipes, tangled in the seaweed. Make sure to leave as much of the seaweed as possible since it is a habitat for insects and other animals that feed seabirds and other organisms.

If you finish the clean-up earlier than planned, you may either dismiss the volunteers earlier, or collect more litter. Make sure to report the litter data only for the area you agreed upon, and nothing else.

Note down the locations of things that you did not remove, so that you (or the local authority) can later decide what to do about each item.

3.3 Sort the litter

Everyone should bring the litter they picked up to the collection point, sort it and measure the litter collected within the recording area, according to the guidelines of the litter monitoring effort you're connected to.

If you find no litter monitoring initiative in your country or region, you should still divide the litter into plastic, metal, paper, glass, organic or mixed (more than one category), and either count the items or weigh them. Also record the strangest, funniest, or most dangerous things you've found. Take a few photographs of the litter and any willing volunteers to document your findings.

Leave the litter at the pick-up point to await collection, making sure it won't be dispersed again by animals or the weather.

3.4 Debrief the event

Congratulate people for turning up and doing a good job! Take a group photo, showing your happy faces and some of the litter you found. Talk to the group about the event. Some suggestions for questions:

- What were the top five items of litter found? How many items of each did we collect?
- How did it get here – was it deposited here on purpose, was it dropped by accident, or was it carried by nature?
- What can we do to reduce this type of litter?
- What was the strangest, funniest or most surprising thing we found? (This can be great material to share on social media!)
- What other environmental issues did we find? How could these be solved completely or in part?
- What natural values did we find? How could these be safeguarded or appreciated?
- Did you learn something new? What will you be doing differently from now on?
- What went particularly well? What can be done better next time?
- May we contact you for another clean-up or similar action? (Mark their names in the participant sheet; include also any people who joined the clean-up when seeing you.)

Listen attentively, and note down anything interesting the volunteers said. Answer any questions that are of interest to the whole group, or offer to reply privately if not.

Collect names of anyone who came on the day or joined when seeing you, so that you can contact them for future events. Say goodbye to each person – and until next time!



4. After the date

4.1 Share your findings

If you connected with a litter monitoring effort, submit your data in the required format: on paper, electronically etc.

Please tell us also about your event ([see our contacts at the bottom](#)):

- the name and GPS coordinates of the place
- the total number of volunteers involved (including yourself)
- an estimate of the size of the area cleaned up (you may use Google Maps' measuring tool)
- the total number or weight of items collected, if you counted them; an estimate will do
- the top five items collected
- the strangest, funniest or most surprising things you found
- any other environmental issues you came across, such as dead animals, invasive species, and other forms of pollution such as sewage
- any follow-up actions you have in mind
- how this guide helped you, anything we missed out, any way of improving this document

Share your results on social media, blogs etc. Get back to the local government, share your results and thank them for their help. Try to make sure they will collect the litter, and to engage them with any follow-up actions you may be planning. Make sure participants also get a copy via email of any reports/media coverage that you put out.

4.2 Start organizing the next clean-up

If all went well, why not do this again? You have valuable practical experience, a larger core group, some organizers, perhaps the support of the local government. It will be easier next time.

Why not adopt this place permanently and start planning another clean-up or other follow-up actions here? As your group's capacity evolves, you may want to plan clean-ups elsewhere, too.

Another idea is to do more specialized clean-ups. What special skills and equipment does your group have? What connections? Some ideas:

- Organize work days for companies. A growing number of companies (especially multinationals) seek to do corporate social responsibility (CSR) work in the community.
- Consider approaching a company to help them fulfill their CSR objectives, benefit nature, and maybe help your group with possible donations or sponsorship.
- Talk to the local government about the items you did not remove. These may need specialized handling, such as heavy items (cars, refrigerators), building debris or biological waste. Note any negative impacts of removing the litter, such as trampling by trucks; in some cases, it may be better to leave things as they are!
- Talk to a diving club to set up an underwater clean-up, a yachting club to set up a marine or estuary clean-up, a caving club to clean up a cave...

4.3 Consider further actions

Other suggestions for possible actions in connection with the clean-up include:

- Reducing overall litter, e.g. by adopting a simpler lifestyle, recycling and composting
- Taking a look at waste collection in your area: how is it disposed of, and where?
- Dealing with other issues in that location, such as invasive species or other pollution
- Improving any ecological assets in that location, such as special species or landscapes

4.4 Further reading

For some global statistics on waste collection and management, see the 2012 World Bank report *What a Waste: A Global Review of Solid Waste Management*, available as a PDF [here](#).

The Waste Atlas is an interactive map with waste-related data, such as landfills and treatment plants: <http://www.atlas.d-waste.com>.

5. Our contact details

Have we helped you? Can we improve this document? We would love your feedback!

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Thank you for making this world a little less cluttered!