



How young environmentalists can help tackle the plastic pollution crisis

A guide for scouts, environmental clubs and any young people who want to reduce waste and protect the environment.

Included in this guide



First observations



Understand where plastic is used in your everyday life



Make a plan to reduce plastic waste in your home or school



Learn how waste is managed in your broader community



Organize a clean-up and share what you learned



Next step: Nurdles

Look around you, do you see any items made of plastic? Is any of it plastic packaging or other single-use items that are designed to be used just once and then thrown away?

Plastic waste and the resulting plastic pollution threatens the health of our waters, our wildlife, our environment and ourselves. Most of us recycle, take reusable bags with us when we shop, and look for new ways to stop using so much single use plastic “stuff”. Our individual actions are necessary, but won’t be enough. Plastic fragments have been found at the top of the Alps, in the deepest parts of our oceans and likely, in your local waterways.

The good news is that the movement to move beyond plastic is growing. More states, communities and businesses are getting rid of plastic bags, foam containers and other plastic “stuff” we can live without. As a scouting group, school environmental club or on your own, use this guide to learn about plastic waste and take part in helping to tackle the plastic pollution crisis in your own home or school and in your broader community.

Part 1: First observations

Pick a place in your community to take a walk and observe how plastic waste is impacting that area. You might choose a local park, beach, trail or other green space.

As you walk around the area, take photos of any plastic litter you encounter and log your observations using the worksheet provided. Can you tell where the litter came from? Is it a food container or wrapper? Is it packaging?

What else do you observe? Is there wildlife or other parts of the natural area that are interacting with or being impacted by the litter? Record your observations.

With help from an adult, use the internet to learn more about plastic waste, where it comes from and what its impacts are. Here are a few suggested articles:

- [Wildlife over waste](#) from Environment America
- [What you can do to reduce plastic waste](#) from U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- [Plastic bag bans work](#) from PIRG
- [Too many grocery store items come with excessive plastic packaging](#) from Environment America
- [What are microplastics?](#) from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration National Ocean Service

Definitions

- **Microplastic:** Plastic debris that is less than 5 mm in length is considered microplastic. That's the the width of the end of a pencil.
- **Single-use plastic:** Plastic products that are designed or intended to be used once and discarded.
- **Packaging:** Containers, bags or other wrapping that can be used to contain stuff we buy and are often thrown out after use.



*Left: Examples of single-use plastics. A plastic foam cup, take-out container and a plastic bag.
Photo credit: Staff*

*Right: A plastic bag caught in a tree.
Photo credit: Shiola Odan on Unsplash*



Part 2: Understand where plastic is used in your everyday life



Above: A plastic audit of a packed lunch.
Photo mockup via Canva

Conduct a plastic audit in your home or school. Pick an aspect of your life such as mealtime or your bathroom to focus on. Identify all of the plastic you use in that room or routine and record your findings.

If you want to do a plastic audit of your whole home or day, keep a log of all the items that go in your trash, recycling and compost.

You can also use a notebook to record all of the items you interact with throughout the day and whether or not they are plastic or single-use.

Part 3: Make a plan to reduce plastic waste in your home or school

After reviewing the findings of your plastic audit, work with parents, teachers or other adults to make a pledge and a plan to reduce your home or school's single-use plastic use.

Option 1: Pick 3 single-use plastic items and find reusable or refillable alternatives you can replace them with.

Some items have reusable alternatives that you can easily swap in as part of your daily routine. Bringing your own bag shopping instead of getting plastic bags can be an easy swap. You could buy or make reusable sandwich bags or reusable food wrap to use for packing lunches or snacks.

Check out a refillery or zero waste store

For more info about reusable or refillable alternatives, check out your local zero waste store or refillery. These are businesses that aim to provide low or no waste options for grocery shopping, personal care products or other goods depending on the store.

[Read more about these businesses in our report.](#)

Part 3: Continued

Option 2: Identify 2 items that have a large amount of single-use plastic packaging and replace them with an option that has less plastic packaging or is packaged in reusable, returnable or recyclable packaging.

Some things, especially individually packaged items can come with a lot of plastic packaging waste. For example:

- Individually portioned trail mix or plastic-wrapped snack cheeses can be convenient, but by buying those items in a way that isn't individually packaged, you can use reusable containers for taking snacks on-the-go which can help you reduce waste.
- Soaps, shampoos and lotions in traditional plastic bottles create more waste than most lotions, soaps and shampoos that come in bar form.
- Plastic juice bottles are only used once, but some beverage companies use glass bottles that can be returned and reused.

For mealtime or kitchen plastic waste, head to the grocery store and investigate what packaging options are available for similar products. Use that information when making your plan.

Option 3: Identify some single-use plastic items that you don't need and make a pledge to not buy them again.

Some single-use plastic items are things we don't actually need. Are any of the single-use plastic items that you found in your audit things you don't actually need? If they are, make a plan with your household or school to cut them out of your routine.



*Right: A refill station where reusable containers can be filled with bulk items.
Photo credit: Benjamin Brunner via Unsplash*

Part 4: Learn how waste is managed in your broader community

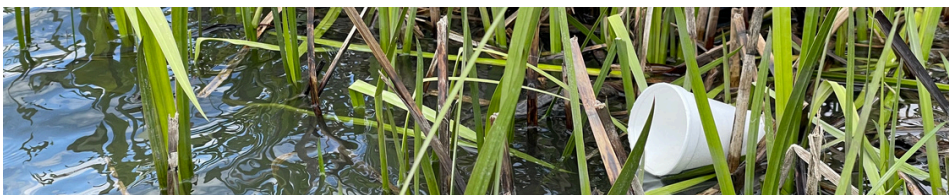
Learn more about what happens to the plastic that you put in the recycling bin or garbage, and what happens if it ends up as litter on our streets and environment. Not every community has the same rules around what sorts of materials can be recycled, composted or put in the garbage. With an adult, use the internet or community resources like your local library to learn how to properly dispose of different types of materials in your community. Then call your local waste hauling company and recycling center and ask them about what happens with the material they collect. Use the sample questions provided.

Next, if you can, go back to the place where you did your initial observations. Map out the availability of trash, recycling and compost bins in that area. Note any trash cans that are overflowing or in need of maintenance. If that area needs more trash or recycling bins, contact the relevant local authorities such as the city or park district to advocate for better waste management in the area.

Even if items are properly put in a trash or recycling bin, some waste will end up as litter on our streets and in our natural environment. Lightweight plastic items can be caught by a breeze and get swept out of the can, or in transport from one place to another, some waste will escape. And unfortunately we know that plastic breaks down into smaller microplastics that leak and drift. To understand where that plastic litter might end up, take a look at a map of your community and identify waterways that might carry litter downstream.

Sample questions

1. How often do you collect the trash at each location?
2. Where does the waste go once it is collected?
3. How do you make sure that it reaches its destination?
4. How are recycled items separated so that they can be used to their full potential?
5. Are there any problems with the current system?
6. Is there a way to make the process more environmentally friendly?



*Left: A plastic foam cup floating in a lagoon.
Photo credit: Staff*

Part 5: Organize a clean-up and share what you learned

Now that you know more about how plastic waste is impacting your community, take action by organizing a clean-up in your community and share what you've learned about plastic waste.



Step 1: Decide on your location, date and time

Call the local authorities such as the city park district to understand how you can get permission to organize a cleanup. Some cities and towns may have information on their website to walk you through how to organize a cleanup in their parks.

Before calling, have a specific location and a few dates and times in mind that would work best for the event.

Finalize the basic logistics of when and where.

Depending on the size of the park or area, you'll want a couple of hours to make sure you can do a thorough clean-up.



Step 2: Recruit others to help you

Next, you can start to spread the word to others. Start with friends, family, your scout group or environmental club. If your school requires community service hours, this cleanup might be able to fulfill part of that requirement for students who participate.

You can also think about tapping into other existing organizations. Many communities have organized groups that are specifically interested in doing community volunteer work.

You can also invite other community members through social media, word of mouth, or putting up flyers.

Keep track of who has committed to attend using a sign-up form like Google Forms or by keeping a list in your notebook.



Above: Participants at cleanup events.
Photo credit: Staff

Part 5: Continued

Step 3: Gather materials

Depending on the number of participants and the landscape of your location, you may need different materials. Will you be cleaning up at a river and need to wade into the water? You will probably need boots for that. Is this a beach cleanup? Consider having some sieves or colanders to separate litter from the sand.

Here are some materials to gather for any type of cleanup:

- Sign-in sheet
- Gloves and/or garbage pickers: It is important that folks are safe while participating in the cleanup and gloves are an important part of that. In an effort to reduce the plastic waste from the cleanup itself, you can encourage folks to bring gardening gloves that can be washed and reused while still protecting themselves while picking up litter.
- Bags to collect the litter: Think about how participants will be able to separate litter that is recyclable from litter headed for the landfill. Dedicated bags for things like glass bottles can help sort the materials as litter is being collected.

Step 4: Make a plan for waste disposal

Make a plan for how to dispose of the waste once the cleanup is complete. Talk with the park district or other official about what waste collection is available on-site at your location.



Left: Picking up trash in a park.
Photo credit: Staff



Right: A green trash can.
Photo credit: Ted Balmer on
Unsplash

Part 5: Continued

Step 5: Hold the clean-up

When people arrive, welcome them and get them set up with materials and an area to clean. Working together in teams of 2-5 can help to make the litter clean-up more fun.

Bonus: Use your clean-up to share tips for reducing plastic waste

At the event, share what you've learned about plastic waste and the need to reduce our use of single-use plastic from the source. You might share some facts that you've learned when welcoming folks to your cleanup or have flyers that share tips for reducing single-use plastic use. In addition to the accomplishments of cleaning up a natural area in your community, you can help inspire participants to help continue advocating for reducing plastic waste.

Step 6: Report back on what you accomplished

Follow up with participants, community members, your friends and family members to share what you've learned and what was accomplished during the clean-up. Sharing photos and information like how many bags or pounds of litter was collected are great for celebrating your accomplishments.

And tell us too! We'd love to hear from you about your experience learning about the plastic pollution problem and taking action in your own community.



Next step: Nurdles

Lots of the plastic pollution comes from the plastic that we interact with in our everyday lives that breaks apart in a landfill or as litter, but some of this microplastic is in the form of tiny pellets or nurdles, which are used to make other plastic products. Nurdles are estimated to be the second-most common type of primary microplastic — plastics intentionally manufactured to be tiny, not broken-down pieces of larger plastic — in the ocean by weight. You can take your plastic pollution prevention efforts to the next level by learning more about plastic pellets and organizing a pellet patrol. [Find out more.](#)

Have a story to share or want to connect?

Contact us: **Emily Kowalski**
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Above: Volunteers at a beach cleanup.

Photo credit: Staff

Headers photo credit: 89Stocker via Canva

Part 1: First observations

Environment America & PIRG's: How young environmentalists can help tackle the plastic pollution crisis

Your name: _____

Use this worksheet to record observations of litter and waste in a local natural area. Use the back of the page for additional space.

Location of observations: _____

What type of environment is it (park, river, field, beach, etc.): _____

Type of litter	Number of items observed	Where was the litter observed?	Notable characteristics (size, color, type of material, etc)
Example: Plastic		Near baseball stands At the edge of the river	Broken pieces of foam cups A pair of sunglasses Bits of yellow balloon
Plastic			
Paper			
Metal			
Glass			
Other: _____			
Other: _____			
Other: _____			

Any other observations?