

The Great Global Cleanup — Earth Day 2020

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This is the second in a series of six articles about Earth Day Network's five campaigns for the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. The first of these is [EARTHRISE](#), a global call to political action.

The Great Global Cleanup COVID-19 update: *To comply with federal, state, and local advisories in response to COVID-19, many [cleanup events](#) will be postponed until later in the year, while some may move forward if they meet current safety criteria. Double-check the current status of cleanup events. Clean up safely on your own or in small groups when possible. Every action counts!*

Earth Day 2020 on April 22 will be the 50th iteration of the unofficial holiday. On the first Earth Day in 1970, 20 million Americans — 10 percent of the U.S. population at the time — took to the streets to protest environmental degradation. That initial Earth Day launched the modern environmental movement. Now, Earth Day Network is sponsoring five major campaigns to close out the first five decades of environmental action. One of these is [The Great Global Cleanup](#).

The Great Global Cleanup

“The goal is to remove a billion pieces of trash from parks, beaches, cities, waterways, our neighborhoods — wherever waste is found,” said Kathryn Stoddard, vice president of marketing and development for Earth Day Network. The cleanup aims to reduce waste and plastic pollution, improve habitats, and prevent harm to wildlife and humans.

Collecting one billion pieces of garbage takes a collective effort. Earth Day expects up to 4 million Americans to volunteer and up to 50 million volunteers globally. From the last week in March through the first week in May, global cleanup events registered with Earth Day Network will contribute to the challenge.

“We are coordinators of this campaign, but a vast network of partners on the ground makes it possible,” said Stoddard. [Presenting partners](#) of The Great Global Cleanup include World Cleanup Day, Let's Do It World, National Cleanup Day, and Keep America Beautiful, but hundreds of others are involved, and even small community groups can be part of the Great Global Cleanup by sponsoring a local event.

Anyone planning a cleanup event can [register the event](#) online to appear on the Great Global Cleanup [live map](#) to be counted and attract more volunteers.

Litter Hurts

Even though outdoor cleanup efforts may have stemmed from a sense of tidiness, litter is more than just an eyesore.

Garbage in the environment — especially plastic — can have serious ecological results.

A few years ago, a sea turtle with a plastic straw stuck in its nostril became a symbol of the [harm plastics can do to wildlife](#). But the impacts of unmanaged waste are often less visible and more severe, with indigestible plastic pieces filling animals' stomachs. [Microplastics](#) can work their way from ocean garbage gyres into the food chain, eventually risking human health as well as wildlife.

Cleanups Are for Everyone

Groups of people have always come together to make physical improvements to their communities. Cleanups are a natural extension of that impulse. You don't have to understand climate science or subscribe to any particular political philosophy to hate seeing garbage clogging waterways.

"Nobody wants to live on a dirty planet!" said Kathleen Rogers, Earth Day Network president.

"Our goal for Earth Day 50 was to create pathways for people to be engaged wherever they live and wherever they are in their personal journeys," said Stoddard.

Joining the Great Global Cleanup

In consideration of the [coronavirus pandemic](#), many protesters may choose to join cleanup events instead. Spreading out over an area in search of litter is much more compatible with social distancing than marches or rallies.

"We're still planning events, although we are monitoring the coronavirus situation and there may be changes," cautions Stoddard. Visit the Great Global Cleanup [live map](#) to find and join a cleanup event near you.

If you are new to cleanups, there are some safety considerations not related to viruses. To learn about the safe handling of waste and everything else you need to know for a successful cleanup, read Earth Day Network's [15 Cleanup Tips](#). You can have an even bigger effect using the [Earth Challenge app](#), which helps track what you collect. Contributing data about the amount and types of waste you find helps scientists understand how waste spreads in the environment.

Spending a day picking up someone else's trash might sound a bit depressing, but it doesn't have to be.

"Cleanups are really fun. People really like them," assures Stoddard. "It's a social act and at the end of a cleanup event there's a real sense of satisfaction."

So many global problems seem overwhelming. It can be hard to believe individual actions can make a difference. Joining a cleanup — or having [your own private cleanup](#) — is an action that provides concrete results at the end of the day.

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