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What TrashBlitz Revealed About Pollution in Parks

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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[national parks](#), [plastic pollution](#), [reduce waste](#), [single-use plastic](#)


We established national parks to protect and preserve some of the most beautiful landscapes of our nation as truly natural areas. But protection from development does not protect our national parks from pollution. And just like the oceans, where **8 million tons** of plastic collect every year, plastic pollution is piling up in national parks. A new study shows just how serious the problem is and concludes with some recommendations for fixing the problem.

Plastic Problems

In 2018, [a study](#) of tidal areas in 35 national parks found [microplastics](#) in every single sample. Most plastic pollution eventually finds its way to the sea, but plastic is not just a problem once it reaches aquatic areas. And there is a lot of plastic pollution in the national parks. More than 300 million people visit the parks

What Do You Think?

Are you considering moving because of climate change?

- Yes
- No
- I'm researching my options to decide

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each year. These visits generate nearly 80,000 tons of ^{CLOSE} municipal solid waste – much of it plastic. As we work towards a [post-plastic world](#), national parks are a good place to start.

In 2011, the National Park Service began to implement a policy to phase out the sale of single-use plastic water bottles in the parks. Unfortunately, this policy was reversed in 2017 by the Trump Administration. In 2022, [Secretarial Order 3407](#) directed the Interior Department to phase out all single-use plastic in national parks. Their goal is to gradually reduce the procurement, sale, and distribution of single-use plastic products and packaging by 2032. But as history has shown, departmental policies are less secure than legislation. [Citizen science](#) projects help environmentalists quantify problems to help get environmental legislation passed.



TrashBlitz

In August, Earth911 encouraged readers to participate in [TrashBlitz](#), a citizen science campaign of The 5 Gyres Institute. This nonprofit conducts research that enables data-driven environmental solutions to plastic pollution. The summer campaign mobilized 558 volunteers to document plastic pollution in 44 cleanups at U.S. National Parks using the TrashBlitz app. Volunteers also randomly sampled data from the Yosemite Facelift, an annual cleanup event in Yosemite National Park that collected 14,780 pounds of trash this year.

Study Results

Unsurprisingly, volunteers observed the most trash near visitor centers and campsites. In total, 4,237 pieces of trash were tagged. The single most common item collected was cigarette butts, followed by food wrappers and plastic bottles. Plastic made up 81% of the pieces of trash they collected. Nearly half of the waste was related to food. Cups, straws, lids, utensils, plates, takeout containers, and stirrers comprised almost 10% of total trash.

Secretarial Order 3407 mentions that [bioplastics](#) are an environmentally preferable alternative to single-use plastic, but bioplastic items like Eco-Products cups were found littering national parks. Most bioplastics are only compostable



in commercial waste management systems. They be^{CLOSE}ve like conventional plastic in the environment.

Textiles, including clothes, hats, gloves, and shoes, were the fifth most common item found. Most of these were probably lost rather than dumped. But since more than half of our [textiles are made from plastic](#), dropping a glove on the trail is no different from dropping a plastic bottle.

Although [expanded polystyrene](#) was not one of the dominant waste materials in terms of quantity, the report calls it out as a priority material because of its toxicity and potential harm.



Next Steps – Policy

The TrashBlitz results will be used to lobby members of Congress to support the [Reducing Waste in National Parks Act](#) that was reintroduced by Representative Quigley (D-IL) last year. Passing the Act will make it harder for future administrations to reverse the Interior’s current policy of plastics reduction. You can [write to your representatives](#) in Congress to support the Act.

When you do, let your representative know that a plastic ban is feasible when paired with park infrastructure like:

- Increased access to water and beverage refilling stations
- A deposit return system for beverage containers
- The use of reusable dishes and cutlery at on-site dining facilities
- Careful management of bioplastics.

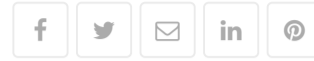
Next Steps – Personal

Many of us who are careful about reducing waste at home still fall back on the convenience of single-use plastics when we travel. When you visit the national parks, you can reduce your own use of disposable plastic and avoid littering (even items you think are biodegradable). If you smoke, pay particular attention to your [cigarette butts](#). These tiny items have an outsized environmental impact. Follow the [Leave No Trace principles](#), especially “Pack it in, pack it out” waste disposal. Whether packing a picnic, camping, or buying concessions, choose [reusable foodware](#) over compostable and disposable options whenever possible. And don’t forget that disposable wipes and many textiles are plastic,



too. Dispose of wipes properly and treat all your outerwear like something you can't afford to lose on the trail, whether it's Patagonia fleece or cheap drugstore mittens.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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