

State of our Trails Report 2023



The Infographic

FOR EVERY 100 TRAIL CLEANS

The aim of this report is to provide evidence of the effects of single-use pollution on our trails and wild places.

As such this report is full of data. Here are some of our highlights.

FOR EVERY 100 ITEMS YOU REMOVE



28 pieces will be within 300m² of a summit



81 pieces will be single-use pollution



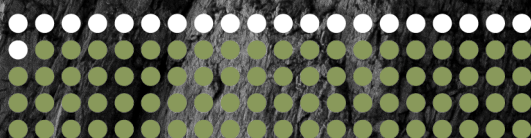
10 pieces would not exist if we had a DRS



18 will have Lucozade as its most found brand



32 will show signs of animal interactions



21 interactions will show signs of animal death



50 will have disposable vapes along the trails



90 people will feel more connected to nature

At Trash Free Trails (TFT), we have always had conviction in our beliefs. We believed that we could make a positive impact on the trails and wild places that we love – so we went out and did exactly that. We will continue to conduct and champion trail cleans for as long as we need to.

We also believed that the ‘litter problem’ was far bigger and more complex than anyone had yet acknowledged. We believed that single-use pollution was damaging our environment; we saw the results with our own eyes.

We also knew that for some things, ‘belief’ isn’t enough. We needed to demonstrate the scale of the problem, and the real impact that single-use pollution is having on our forests, moors, mountains, trails and on us.

The State of our Trails Report (SoOT) 2023 is our most comprehensive representation of what we can now say we know. This document outlines the causes, prevalence composition and impacts of single-use pollution on recreational trails and their users. It represents thousands of hours of citizen science, ground breaking experimental methodologies and over three years of data. The result is the most in-depth and scientifically rigorous analysis of what is commonly known as ‘litter’ in recreational trail ecosystems ever.

Prevalence

A ubiquitous sight

We’ve estimated that there might be as many as 9.1 million items of SUP on the UK’s recreational trails. This means that a walker, runner or rider could, on average, encounter a piece of SUP every 24 metres

We can now estimate the prevalence of single-use pollution (SUP) on our trails and the result is frightening. If you live in the UK, you are statistically certain to encounter SUP every time you go for a walk, run or bike ride on our trails and in our green spaces. Discarded crisp packets, drinks bottles and cans are so ingrained into our environment that they are effectively impossible to escape. We are truly living in the age of the Anthropocene.

Composition

Single-use, a long legacy

Over 10% of SUP that we discover on our trails would fall under the items collected in an “all in” Deposit Return Scheme (DRS).

We also have the best ever view of the makeup of ‘litter’ blighting our recreational trails. Virtually every item of ‘trash’ is single-use pollution in some form or another. Items that by their very nature are designed to be used and discarded within moments. Their useful life may be short, but make no mistake, they are going nowhere fast.

Impact

So much more than an eyesore

32% of respondents to the questions on faunal interaction confirmed signs of interaction with SUP. Of those, 21% reported animal deaths.

When it comes to new knowledge, we are most proud of our work looking at the impact that single-use pollution has on both the environment and on us – trail users. Our work is now beginning to reveal the bleak reality. We can say that our early findings point towards a potential direct negative impact on flora and fauna when single-use pollution is introduced to the environment. We can also say that if you decide to embark on a trail clean you will almost certainly discover some form of animal interaction. This is often in the form of bite marks, but we are now regularly recording animal mortality as a direct result of ‘litter’.

We can also now state that based on our research, single-use pollution breaks down over time and significantly increases the amount of microplastics found in our soil. And finally, single-use pollution is directly impacting our enjoyment of the outdoors. Time outside is repeatedly shown to be beneficial to our mental and physical health; single-use pollution is taking that away from us. We notice the visual interference and mourn the perceived (and real) impact on the places we love.

Knowledge is power

But only if we act upon it

We know more than ever before. Now it is our collective responsibility to do something about it. Trash Free Trails was founded on action but here we're striving to go a step further. If we are to truly manage and mitigate the impact of single-use pollution, we need to tackle the source. That's why we have laid out a 'Trash Free Manifesto' made up of five Areas For Change, detailing just how we intend to drive meaningful action.

1 Single-use Pollution; Call It What It Is

You might have already noted our terminology. 'Litter' is neither a suitable, nor accurate, term for the harmful single-use products entering our environment

2 Connection First

We strongly believe that the dropping of single-use pollution is a symptom of disconnection with the world around us. We want to do something about that.

3 No-Brainer Policy Change NOW

So much of the single-use pollution we encounter wouldn't be there at all if the UK were to introduce proven, effective legislation. What are we waiting for?

4 Shared Responsibility: Own Your Sh*t

For too long the narrative around 'litter' has focused solely on the consumer, but we are only one part of the problem.. What responsibility are the manufacturers of plastic bottles, cans and wrappers taking for their role?

5 Supporting the UN Plastics Treaty 2025

The Treaty provides structure and shared methodologies for more comprehensive and cohesive scientific research across all ecosystems. By dedicating ourselves to its aims, we will be able to contribute to the international effort to end plastic pollution by 2040.

Making a small-normous impact

We have often said that we are small-normous. Trash Free Trails is a small core with a wide and passionate team of volunteers, friends, allies and collaborators. We would not have achieved what we have without them. And to keep making progress we will need even more help; from legislators to scientists, educators to performers and always riders, runners and roamers. The time to act is now. What will you do?

Actions To Take Right Now

As you are reading this, consider what you, and your own community, may be able to contribute. Here a few suggestions to get the ball rolling...

Stop saying 'litter'; tell your friends why.

Send the State of Our Trails Report to your MP, telling them why this matters.

Share the Report in your workplace; organise a team trail clean.