

## **Trash on the Trail**

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Every year, more people go hiking to enjoy mountains, forests, and rivers. Hiking allows people to connect with nature and find peace. However, many hikers leave behind waste such as plastic bottles, snack wrappers, and tissue paper. This litter is more than an eyesore. It damages the environment, harms wildlife, and disrupts natural cycles. The problem of trail waste must be addressed before it destroys the places hikers cherish.

Plastic litter breaks down slowly. Bottles, cans, wrappers, and foam containers may remain in nature for decades. As these items degrade, they release toxins into soil and water, which damages plants, soil fertility, and water quality. Streams that flow from hiking areas may carry these pollutants downstream and affect entire ecosystems (Environmental Literacy Council, n.d.; Daniel Rodriguez, 2025).

Wild animals are also at risk. Many species confuse colorful wrappers or plastic pieces for food. Ingesting these items can cause choking or internal blockages, which often result in death. Wildlife may also get caught in litter such as plastic rings or wrappers and suffer injury. Even small creatures and birds experience habitat damage when trash accumulates (Live to Plant, 2025; Environmental Literacy Council, n.d.).

Litter also affects the hiking experience. Seeing trash along a trail diminishes natural beauty and discourages others from caring for the environment. Many hikers say that once they see trash, they feel less inclined to keep the trail clean. Burning trash is sometimes considered a solution, but it releases hazardous chemicals like dioxins and microplastics into the air. This practice harms both people and animals (Woodland Elysium, n.d.; Reddit user, 2023).

The Philippines has experienced the impact of waste on nature. Mount Banahaw, a sacred site, was closed after litter accumulated along its trails. Visitors and devotees lost trust in the sanctuary (Mt. Banahaw, 2025). Similarly, Boracay Island was shut down in 2018 to clear sewage and plastic pollution. This action showed how litter can cripple even famous tourist destinations (Time, 2018).

The root of this problem seems to be a lack of awareness and care. Many hikers leave trash because they think someone else will clean it up. Remote paths rarely have trash bins or waste services. Hikers must be educated to follow simple rules, such as packing out all trash, carrying reusable bottles, and avoiding burning waste. Adopting a “Leave No Trace” mindset is a strong solution (Self, 2022; Daniel Rodriguez, 2025).

Trail managers and local governments have a role to play too. Park officials should place educational signs at trailheads, provide trash bins, and run cleanup events. Local authorities can support these efforts by maintaining facilities and encouraging communities to care for their natural spaces.

As hiking increases, the problem of litter on trails will worsen unless action is taken. Trash is not a harmless part of nature. It harms the soil, water, animals, and people. Practicing responsible habits such as carrying out all trash and reusing containers, hikers can help protect the places they love. When combined with better resources and awareness efforts, these habits can preserve wild spaces for future generations.

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