

MOVE4NATURE



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CHAPTER 2

Why do we need to protect our planet?

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It is clear from the evidence that the outdoors provides humans with many benefits. But how do we impact nature?

We often see mountainous areas as a clean, unpolluted environment. However with rising tourism numbers, we are seeing major issues with human waste pollution, single-use plastics and mismanagement of waste. Our mountains and green spaces are becoming choked with air and plastic pollution. The European Alps is one of the world regions with the highest loss of glacial mass, as temperatures increase almost at twice the rate in the Northern Hemisphere compared to the South. Climate change is the biggest threat to the Alps.

The soaring numbers of tourists visiting the mountains each year puts pressure on the local environment and infrastructure. It can lead to overcrowding and damage to natural habitats, as well as straining the sustainability of the region through extra pressure on water and energy supplies (Schellingerhout, 2023).

Research by the The Alpine Association of Slovenia has found that the Slovenian mountains are most commonly littered with waste that mountaineers carry in their backpacks such as plastic bags with food, bottles of water and other drinks, homemade sandwiches wrapped in aluminium foil, cans, paper tissues, pieces of paper and packaging from energy and chocolate bar, and similar.

“Almost every piece of plastic that has ever been made is still somewhere on the planet.” (Trash Free Trails).



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Quick Stats

120 million people visit the European Alps each year, many of whom participate in outdoor activities such as hiking, cycling and skiing.

Almost 26 million tonnes of plastic waste is generated in Europe every year.

87% of Europeans are worried about the impact of plastic products on the environment.

What are the main pieces of litter we find on the trails?



Drinks cans



Food wrappers



Plastic bottles



Dog poo bags



Cigarette butts

Q: What happens to plastics left in nature?

A: The plastics start to degrade - they break up into smaller pieces, but they never completely disappear. These tiny pieces of plastic are super harmful and toxic to the environment. Millions of animals are killed by plastics every year, from birds to fish and everything in between. Animals can become entangled or digest these plastics, which is really bad for them.

Plastic pollution isn't great for humans either. Microplastics (plastics smaller than 5mm) can end up in our water and food sources, and these have a negative impact on animal health, and potentially human health too.

Some good news! The rate of plastics being recycled in Europe is increasing, however it still remains below 50%.

We want to make a positive impact on the beautiful places that we visit. By empowering young people to remove what others have carelessly left behind, we will all play our part in protecting the environment.

Quiz

How long do banana peels take to decompose?

- 10 days
- 9 months
- 2 years

We might think that because banana peel is natural it won't take so long for them to decompose, but it actually takes a whopping 2 years for the peel to fully biodegrade!

How far away from buildings/water sources (e.g. rivers) should you go before going to the toilet in nature?

- 15 metres
- 30 metres
- 45 metres

It's important that human waste does not get into water sources as this can create harmful pollution to habitats. Make sure you're at least 30 metres (or 70 steps) from the nearest building and/or water source before going to the toilet.

How long does toilet paper take to decompose?

- 2 weeks
- 5 weeks
- 8 weeks

Depending on whether the toilet paper has been buried or not, it can take at least five weeks for toilet paper to biodegrade.

How long do wet wipes take to decompose?

- 10 years
- 100 years
- 1000 years

Correct answers

How long do banana peels take to decompose?

10 days

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Travel

The way that we travel to the mountains also has a big impact on the environment.

Air pollution is the largest environmental health risk in Europe. Road vehicles are a major contributor to air pollution, which has serious health impacts for humans and the environment alike. It can aggravate respiratory and cardiovascular diseases and is a common cause of heart diseases, strokes and lung cancer.

Try to find cleaner, greener ways to travel when you are heading to the mountains, e.g. use public transport, car-share, cycle if you can.

Summary

In this chapter, we have talked about some of the impacts that littering and transport have on us, the environment, and animals. Let's now talk about how hiking can be used as a tool to teach young people about the importance of environmental protection and climate action.

Watch the videos



Tips on how to behave in nature



[Watch the video](#)

Why pollution monitoring in nature is important



[Watch the video](#)

Sources

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www.institut-impact.si/move4nature

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