



10 Minutes for the Planet

#trashtag - The world grabs a binbag ©

by Sarah Heath

Hello! I'm Sarah Heath and you're listening to 10 Minutes for the Planet on EnglishWaves.

Who doesn't love a 'before' and 'after' photograph? Social media platforms are awash these last few weeks with images taken before a chosen area is cleared of litter, and after. Technology and the environment may not always sit comfortably side-by-side but this new trend may just embrace both.

The brainchild of Steven Reinhold back in 2015, the idea came about by accident. Reinhold was driving through California when a paper receipt flew out of the car window as he was driving along. Feeling such guilt at his accidental littering, Reinhold spent the rest of the journey picking up pieces of litter along his route. It was when he'd collected the 100th item off the side of the road that he had his lightbulb moment and the hashtag 'trashtag' was born. Reinhold said; "I wanted to see if I could make picking up trash seem cool!"

Some fans of the challenge spend five minutes clearing roadside litter whenever they make a rest stop on a journey. Families are taking it upon themselves to clear campsites while on holiday, school children are grouping together to de-litter their neighbourhoods and it's become a worldwide phenomenon: from Nepal to Brazil, Uzbekistan to Iran, responsible citizens who have been provoked into action by the sight of prolific and hideous debris spread across what could be a beautiful landscape, are arming themselves with wellington boots, rubber gloves, pitchforks and bin liners to help rid the planet of this scourge.

The baton was recently picked up by an American man, Byron Ramon, who posted a before-and-after photograph of an area a man in Algeria had just spent several hours clearing of litter and undergrowth. His message reads, "Here is a new #challenge for all you bored teens. Take a photo of an area that needs some cleaning or maintenance, then take a photo after you have done something about it, and post it".

And there are many, many, many areas which need attention whether in people's home towns or bigger projects such as a nearby beach. To illustrate the scale of the issue, the overall picture shows that, globally, 1.2 trillion kilograms of rubbish is produced each year, of which each person contributes roughly one kilo per day.

Of that rubbish, 4.5 billion cigarette butts are thrown on the floor every year. Placing them end to end would create a distance equivalent to 117 return trips to the moon! Studies in

the UK have shown that 99% of all roads have cigarette litter on them which contributes to the 30 million tonnes of litter collected from the British streets each year.

Fast food packaging makes up a massive percentage of litter particularly along motorways and major transport routes. It has been noted that people on the move, either in their cars or pedestrians, take the number one spot for littering. This burden is compounded by the fact that 40% of plastic produced is used just once before being discarded. Plastic bags can be partially included in this figure according to a study by the Ocean Conservancy: in the United States, consumers use almost one plastic bag per person per day. Danish citizens have limited their plastic bags to four per person....per year!

The demographic for litterers also shows that the main culprits are between the ages of 18-34. Even children show more respect for the environment! And men are much more likely to litter than women. And bizarrely, littering seems to be contagious! If an area is already covered with litter, people are more likely to drop other rubbish on the floor, the mentality being that if the place already looks a mess, what difference will another piece of rubbish make?

Companies must take their share of the blame too. Greenpeace with a partner organisation, the Break Free from Plastic movement, enlisted the help of thousands of volunteers to compile a list of global companies whose products contribute most to worldwide litter. The study, over a nine-month period covered six continents, 42 countries, 239 cleanup events and over 187,000 pieces of trash. This brand audit showed that Coca-Cola, Danone, Nestlé and Unilever made it into the top ten of companies whose products make up worldwide trash.

And the cost of all this debris strewn across the planet? In Great Britain, the annual cost of cleaning the streets is £1 billion, a sum which could pay the salaries of an extra 33,000 nurses or fund 4,000 libraries. This is in addition to the £13 million paid out by the motorways agency, Network Rail and the Royal Parks. These sums are dwarfed, however, by the United States who fork out \$11.5 billion each year....just to clean up rubbish.

The shot taken and posted to Facebook by Byron Ramon has had over 100,000 likes and been shared over 300,000 times. While the challenge has gone global and people have posted their clear-up stories in countless languages, one word is constant and globally understood: #trashtag.

Litter is not only ugly to look at but research has shown that it has an impact on the mental health of those living locally to rubbish-strewn areas. Some community goals need no better illustration than a clear before-and-after image of what is possible when everyone works together to make the world a prettier, and subsequently happier, place. As one enthusiastic participant said: "it's the only outdoors we have".

Tune in next week for more stories on the environment, here on English Waves.