

Why are American national parks filled with plastic?

Level: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Answer the questions and discuss your answers.

1. What do you think the top environmental threats to our planet are?
2. What percentage of Americans do you think disagree with the selling of single-use plastics in US national parks?
3. Why isn't this figure 100%?
4. What do you think this figure would be for your country? Do people there care a lot about environmental protection?

b. Scan the article to find what information is given in answer to these questions.

2 Key words

a. Write the correct word from the wordpool next to the definitions below. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.

accumulating	address	combat	contractors	convenience
discard	distributed	entangled	escalate	eyesore
mature	outpace	remnants	resonant	sanctuaries

1. having the power to bring images, feelings, memories, etc. into your mind

2. start to become more sensible and wiser as you get older and time goes by

3. spread or shared in a particular way _____
4. a condition that makes it easier to do something and helps you to avoid wasting time or effort

5. get rid of something that you no longer want or need _____
6. becoming more and more over a period of time _____
7. become much worse or more serious _____
8. people or companies whose job is to provide goods or to do work for another person, organization, company, etc. at a particular price _____

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9. something that is ugly or unpleasant to look at _____
10. special areas where animals live in a natural environment protected from people

11. when someone or something is twisted up in something like a wire or net so that they are stuck and cannot easily be set free _____
12. small remaining parts of something _____
13. try to deal with a problem or question, for example, by thinking carefully about it or by doing things to improve a situation _____
14. do something to try to stop something bad from happening or a bad situation from becoming worse _____
15. increase more quickly than something else _____

b. Use some of the key words above to complete these sentences.

1. The gang quickly _____ their weapons after the bank robbery.
2. The bird had become _____ in the wire netting.
3. Governments have been slow to _____ the problem of global warming.
4. The _____ of the previous night's meal were still on the table.
5. The tension _____ until it became unbearable.
6. The new multi-storey car park is a real _____.
7. Many people enjoy the pleasures and _____ of living in a city centre.
8. The demonstrators _____ leaflets to passers-by.

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According to a recent poll, 82% of American voters would support a decision by the National Park Service to stop selling and distributing single-use plastic at national parks

**Jonathan B Jarvis and Christy Leavitt
3 May, 2022**

- 1 The writer Wallace Stegner once called the national parks “America’s best idea”, but the second half of that quote is more resonant today: “They reflect us at our best rather than our worst.”
- 2 National parks like the Grand Canyon in Arizona, Yellowstone, and Acadia provide the closest thing we have to experiencing unbridled nature. They also represent our collective decision not to do something in special places that can harm their environment, like cutting down the forest, mining for minerals or hunting wildlife. Over time, our understanding of what is the right thing not to do has grown and matured. One of those right things not to do is provide single-use plastics in our national parks.
- 3 Plastic rubbish does not belong in these special places. Yet single-use plastic products are being sold and distributed in our national parks.
- 4 Believe it or not, plastic was not used in everyday products until the 1940s. Society functioned without plastic bags, utensils, water bottles and condiment packets before this point. Since then, companies have turned to plastic to create and package just about everything. Think of all the plastic you touch in a day: your toothpaste tube, shampoo bottle, the packaging on your grocery purchases, maybe a takeaway coffee cup or food container. Industry has rapidly created a throwaway culture in which convenience, and plastic producers’ bottom lines, are prioritized above all else.
- 5 But that does come with a price. Plastic has now been found everywhere – not just in your neighbourhood’s streets or along coastlines, but also in the most unexpected of places: in Arctic sea ice, in the absolute deepest part of the ocean, in the air of extremely remote mountains and in the rain falling on our national parks. It’s even been found in most of your food, from fruits and vegetables to seafood, meat, honey, beer, salt and more.
- 6 Plastic is made to last forever, despite much of it being used for only a moment before it’s discarded. So all the plastic accumulating in our environment is not going anywhere for a long time. It will probably exist far longer than America’s earliest national park, Yellowstone, which celebrates its 150th anniversary in 2022.
- 7 No part of our world deserves to be polluted with plastic, but national parks may be one of the most obviously unsuitable places for a problem that has escalated into one of the planet’s top environmental threats. Americans agree. According to a recent Oceana poll, 82% of American voters would support a decision by the National Park Service to stop selling and distributing single-use plastic at national parks. The National Park Service was created to conserve the natural and cultural resources of these treasured areas. To maintain that commitment, the service and its contractors must stop selling and distributing single-use plastic products and offer refillable and reusable alternatives.
- 8 It’s not just that plastic pollution is an eyesore for visitors; it’s also a threat to the wildlife that’s meant to be protected in these sanctuaries. Everything from birds and bears to sea turtles and manatees can swallow or become entangled in the remnants of single-use plastic. Even if it is not discovered by wildlife, plastic eventually breaks up into smaller pieces that can end up in the air we breathe and the water we drink. Scientists are still learning about how this is affecting human health.
- 9 Alternatives exist. Plenty of people and organizations have adopted reusable water bottles as a simple solution to the single-use plastic problem. When Jonathan, the co-author of this piece, was the director of the National Park Service, he issued a policy in 2011 that national parks would install water-bottle refill stations, sell inexpensive reusable water bottles, and ban the sale of single-use plastic water bottles. By 2017, 23 national parks had adopted this programme – but it was reversed in 2017 by the Trump administration under pressure from the plastics industry.

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- 10 It is time to address plastic water bottles and go further, ensuring parks also don't sell food that requires plastic packaging or utensils, or hand visitors disposable plastic bags for their purchases. All of this saves money for visitors and the parks themselves, which would not have to manage the immense amount of waste that comes from providing these products.
- 11 Hundreds of millions of people visit America's 423 national parks every year. Imagine how many plastic bags, beverage bottles, cups, plates, bowls and utensils could be avoided if these attractions stopped selling and distributing them. On top of reducing plastic pollution, Sams and Secretary Haaland would be helping to combat the climate crisis, as plastic has become one of its primary contributors. In fact, it is expected to outpace coal's greenhouse gas emissions by 2030.
- 12 Our parks are meant to offer a rare glimpse into landscapes that once covered all of North America. And the National Park Service has a commitment to conserve these precious areas and the wildlife that inhabit them. It's time they ban plastic so we can enjoy our national parks, unspoiled, well into the future.

Jonathan B Jarvis served 40 years with the National Park Service and was its 18th director.

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First published in *The Guardian*, 03/05/2022

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3 Understanding the article

a. Are these sentences True (T) or False (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false. Include as much detail as you can.

1. There are 23 national parks in the US.
2. So far, no real effort has been made to reduce single-use plastics in national parks.
3. Plastic pollution is dangerous and potentially fatal to wildlife.
4. The authors of the article suggest food and drink retailers should be banned from US national parks.
5. The problem of single-use plastics is not exclusive to US national parks.
6. Single-use plastic packaging of everyday items has been around longer than the oldest US national park.

4 Key language

a. Find two-word collocations with these meanings.

1. free and uncontrolled countryside (paragraph 2)
2. a choice made by many people as a group (paragraph 2)
3. a way of living in which things are not reused (paragraph 4)
4. the amount of money that businesses make or lose (paragraph 4)
5. places that are very valuable or important to you (paragraph 7)
6. the main reason or cause of a problematic situation (paragraph 11)
7. an experience you don't get very often that gives you an idea of what something is like (paragraph 12)

b. Use each collocation in a sentence about the article.

c. Use each of the collocations in sentences or short anecdotes of your own.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions. Expand your answers with details and your opinions.

- Why are American national parks filled with plastic? Who should be held most responsible for the problem of single-use plastic waste in US national parks: retailers, visitors, the park authorities and management, or the US government?
- Would the introduction of waste-collection points, more bins, and recycling facilities alleviate or worsen the problem?
- What unnecessary uses of single-use plastic have you noticed in cafés, hotels, planes and/or supermarkets? What was the plastic used for and what could have been used instead?

6 In your own words

a. Think of five items you use or buy regularly that contain single-use plastic. Make a personal plan for changing your habits for the better.

Item I use now	What I can do instead	Possible problems	When or how often I can realistically make this change
<i>e.g., daily cappuccino in a disposable cup</i>	<i>bring my own coffee thermos</i>	<i>cost; I might forget it in the office</i>	<i>Weekdays when I'm at the office and it's easier to carry a thermos around</i>

b. As a group, discuss your plans and how viable they are. Did your teammates put something on their list that you have already tried to do? How successful have you been with maintaining this change?