



IN CONJUNCTION WITH



Tips,  
Tools and  
Resources for  
Organizers

# Organizing a River Cleanup

**Rivers provide more than 65% of the nation's drinking water**, but trash and pollution can degrade a river's safety and its beauty. An easy way to connect with nature and help your community is by organizing a local river or stream cleanup.

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## Overview

### Summary

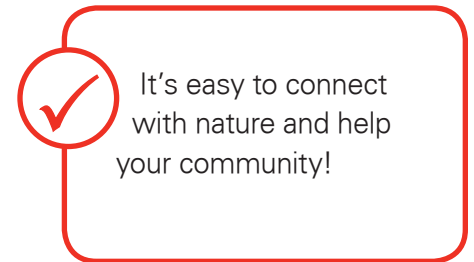
Rivers provide more than 65% of the nation’s drinking water, but trash and pollution can degrade a river’s safety and its beauty. Most Americans live within a mile of a river or stream, and removing trash and recyclable materials from the water or riverbanks can help preserve these vital resources. American Rivers “National River Cleanup Program™” helps communities make their rivers cleaner and safer for its residents.

### The problem

Millions of tons of trash end up in our nation’s rivers and streams every year. Much of this trash can harm our water systems.

### The solution

Join or organize a river cleanup! Last year, 300,000 volunteers participated in the National River Cleanup Program and picked up more than 1.2 million pounds of trash from 76,000 miles of rivers. American Rivers provides a cleanup kit and organizing tools, and organizers provide the volunteers and leave a cleaner river.



### Time commitment

3-4 hours preparation; anywhere from an hour to a full day for the cleanup – depending on your interest and availability.

### Special skills

No special skills are needed – just a desire to enjoy the outdoors and help out a local river.

### Who can do this?

The activity is not strenuous and most cleanups can be performed walking along the riverbanks or wading in the edge of water. The group can be small or large – some cleanups are a handful of friends and some are hundreds of community members working together.

### Great reasons to do this project

This activity shows immediate and direct results – it is good for communities, the environment and individuals. Piles of trash bags and recyclable materials, as well as a cleaner river can instill a sense of pride and ownership.



## The Basic Steps

### Step One: Plan Your Cleanup

Start by contacting American Rivers. They can help you with all of the below:

#### A. Choose a Site

##### Land or Shore?

Identify the strengths and weaknesses of your group, and choose a location that fits them, where everyone can be involved. Walking along the river bank may be the best way to execute your cleanup so everyone can participate. If there are kayakers or boats in the group, floating a river can be an effective way to pick up trash.



Don't forget to pick up trash on land away from the water since this trash could eventually end up in a river.

##### Where to cleanup?

Any local stream or river will work. Working along stretches of river with easy access is recommended. Consider parking availability, safety (working near busy roads poses a risk) and the time needed to conduct the cleanup. For help finding a cleanup site contact a local watershed association or outfitter, or American Rivers at [www.AmericanRivers.org/Cleanup](http://www.AmericanRivers.org/Cleanup).

##### Prepare the Site for Cleanup

You can scout the area in advance to identify target areas and look for trash. Identify paths along the river banks that are easy for people to navigate. Identify hazards and other potential safety issues. Establish an open area as your “base of operations” where volunteers will check in and obtain supplies.

#### B. Choose a Day and Time

Weekends are popular for river cleanups. Usually choosing a day at least a month in advance will give you plenty of time to fully prepare. The length of cleanup is up to you – some do a few hours, others do a half-day, and some turn it into an all-day affair with lunch.



Safety is key! Ensure everyone is cautious and careful while working.



## C. Secure Permission on Public or Private Land

Determine who owns or manages the land. If it isn't clear, the county auditor or land title office should be able to help. If the land is publicly held, contact the government entity that manages the property. It's usually easy to obtain permission to organize a cleanup on public land. Ask if the agency would like to help sponsor the event, by providing volunteer equipment or trash disposal.

If the land is privately held, focus on the positives of your cleanup when speaking with the private landowner. Explain why you would like to hold a cleanup on the river and ask permission to do so. In general, framing your cleanup as a larger volunteer community service project aiming to beautify and restore an important natural resource to the community shifts attention to the positive work that will be done on their property.

Consider informing the landowner that your cleanup is part of American Rivers National River Cleanup Program, a nationwide movement to clean up thousands of stream miles across the country.

## D. Register your Cleanup with American Rivers

Go to [www.AmericanRivers.org](http://www.AmericanRivers.org) to register your cleanup; search through the directory to locate maps of cleanups in your local area.



Receive organizing kits with materials such as trash bags, T-shirts and snacks when you register your cleanup.

## E. Recruit Volunteers

Consider recruiting volunteers from your friends and family, neighbors and community groups, local scout troops, local outfitters, canoe/kayak/clubs or local environmental organizations. You can also ask them to post or hand out flyers to help publicize your cleanup.

You can also recruit by posting your event on [Create The Good's database](#) of local volunteer opportunities.

## F. Inform the Media: Turn Your Cleanup into a News Story

This is a great opportunity to talk to your local reporters about the event and the importance of healthy rivers for healthy communities. Start locally – local media like to publish positive community stories. Notify them at least a week in advance of your event so they can prepare a story. Try everything – newspapers, radio, and television stations.



Stick to the basics when you get someone on the phone: you're planning a river cleanup and you'd like the community to know all about it. Stay positive, and also include information about your organization and the volunteers who will be participating. American Rivers communication staff is happy to work with you to help tailor a press release for your cleanup. Just write to [NRC@AmericanRivers.org](mailto:NRC@AmericanRivers.org).

## G. Engage Civic Leaders

Bring attention to your cleanup and increase media coverage by involving the civic leaders in your community. Your mayor, city or county council members, state legislators, even Congressional leaders might like the opportunity to participate in an event like this – especially if members of the press are covering your cleanup (and vice-versa). Additionally, you can invite school principals, members of the chamber of commerce, and other community leaders to participate in your cleanup.

### Make First Contact

Call his/her office and ask to speak with the scheduler. Introduce yourself, your organization (if appropriate), and briefly describe your upcoming cleanup. Invite the civic leader to attend. The earlier in advance you ask, the greater chance you'll have of gaining their participation.

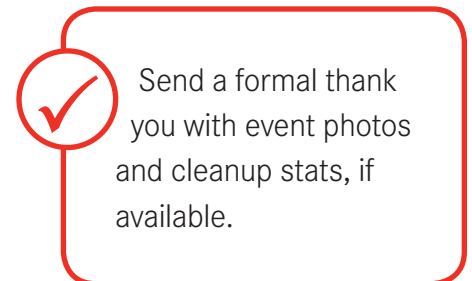
### What to Do With a Civic Leader at Your Cleanup

Greet them personally upon their arrival, thank them for coming, and introduce them to your cleanup leaders.

- Ensure you know their departure plans so you can properly see them off.
- During the pre-cleanup briefing, provide the civic leader(s) with an opportunity to say a few words.
- Take pictures to provide to the media.
- Escort them to the river and discuss any specific areas of concern.

### Follow Up

- Follow up on the river issues you discussed at your cleanup.
- View your cleanup as a foot in the door. Now that you've gained access it's possible to build the relationship.





## Step 2: Execute Your River Cleanup

### A. Site Preparation on Cleanup Day

There are a few things you may want to take care of before volunteers, the press and VIPs arrive.

- Prepare for forecasted inclement weather.
- Try to arrive at least an hour before the river cleanup is scheduled to start, with some volunteers and cleanup leaders to help you set up.
- As you drive in, place signs along the road guiding river cleanup participants to your cleanup site – especially if your cleanup is “off the beaten path.”
- Survey the site and try to spot any new safety concerns that may have cropped up since your last site scouting visit. Do your best to explain any hazards you have identified to volunteers, before they begin to pick up trash.
- If you plan on floating the river you should check the water levels and the river flow to ensure the water is safe to navigate.
- Set up a check-in station near the parking area. (see Volunteer Check-in section for details)
- Establish a base of operations near your volunteer check-in area. Consider these ideas for tables stations to serve your volunteers:
  - o Water and other refreshments
  - o First aid and safety
  - o Trash bag and cleanup supplies
  - o Life jackets and paddles, if you are floating the river
  - o Organizational information – flyers, fact sheets, reports on the river and your organization
  - o Media and volunteer sign-in sheets
- Call any vendors and service providers (waste management authorities, caterers, and boat liveryes) to confirm their arrival and reinforce instructions on finding your cleanup.



Remind volunteers that they are responsible for their own safety and that there may be additional hazards.



## B. Volunteer Check-in /Statement

Place a “check-in” station near the parking area to track all volunteers. Each volunteer should sign an acknowledgement of risk statement upon check-in. This form explains the dangers inherent with a river cleanup and reminds each volunteer of the responsibility for their own safety. While we hope the day goes smoothly, this document helps to protect you and your organization from potential liability if a volunteer gets injured during the cleanup.

## C. Pre-Cleanup Briefing

Review safety issues and cleanup instructions; thank special guests, sponsors and volunteers. Reporters may want to quote from your briefing remarks. Plan a concise talk ahead of time; acknowledge the VIPs in attendance and also give them an opportunity to address the group.

### Opening Remarks

- Briefly talk about the river, its importance to the community, and the vital work you all are doing to protect and restore it.
- Acknowledge and thank the VIPs, sponsors, land owners, public agencies, volunteers, trash collectors, safety boaters, for their support and participation.
- Provide details about the river, including the name, length, distinguishing features, and tributaries of the section of river. Mention the river’s historical and contemporary significance (e.g. water source, fishery, old mills and factories, etc.)
- Help people visualize the bigger picture by showing a map of the river.

### Safety Issues

- Cover points in the following River Safety section.
- Introduce cleanup leaders.
- If floating, let everyone know where the take-out is located on the river.
- Anyone needing to leave early, should inform you before they depart.

✓ See the Sample Liability Waiver Form in this kit and adapt it for your organization.



## Step Three: Conclude Your Cleanup

### A. Volunteer Check-Out

Account for all volunteers for by asking volunteers to “check-out” before they leave. Mark their departure on the check-in sheet for easy tracking.

### B. Trash Disposal

Your river cleanup has the potential to remove a substantial amount of debris, so make arrangements in advance. Consider contacting and alerting your local waste management authority about your river cleanup. Request that they remove the trash collected from your cleanup site and transport it to the appropriate processing facilities. Here’s how to make these arrangements in advance:

#### Call your Local Waste Management Company

- Tell them about your project and explain that it’s a volunteer community service effort.
- Ask if they can haul away your garbage for free or at a discounted price.
- Ask about proper disposal of special / hazardous materials (see below).

#### Recruit Volunteers with Pickup Trucks

- Depending on the scale and location of your cleanup it may be easiest to have volunteers haul the trash offsite to a landfill.

#### Attempt to Separate Trash into Like Materials

- Much of your garbage will be recyclable. Take steel, aluminum, plastics and glass to the local recycling center.
- Some items may have value, such as the steel and aluminum. Making arrangements to recycle these items could help you recoup any costs associated with your cleanup.



## Hazardous and Special Materials

- Tires, batteries, chemical containers and explosives are all materials that need to be taken to special processing facilities.
- Discuss this on your call with your solid Waste Management District to learn how to properly dispose of the different materials.
- If you discover hazardous materials, contact your state’s Department of Environmental Management, Pollution Control or like agency IMMEDIATELY. Do not attempt to handle hazardous materials on your own.

## C. Post Cleanup Party

Once your cleanup is over, you’ll have a pile of trash that you and your volunteers have tirelessly collected and a more pristine river from your efforts. Now you can celebrate a job well done! Have a picnic, cookout or lunch. Or, make arrangements with a local restaurant/deli/grocery store to donate food in exchange for recognition as a sponsor.



Record your results (number of trash bags, plastic water bottles, bags, tires, etc.) to measure the positive impacts you make.

## D. After Your Cleanup

You’ll leave the river in better shape than you found it. After the trash has been hauled away, thank those who contributed to the success of your cleanup. Encourage them to help again. Also, take special care to thank reporters and VIPs (civic leaders, community leaders) individually. Following up with a phone call or note to VIPs is a great way to engage them for future community/environmental projects.

Report your trash collection statistics back to American Rivers so they can include your results in the national total of trash removed from America’s rivers through National River Cleanup. Go to [www.AmericanRivers.org/cleanup](http://www.AmericanRivers.org/cleanup) and click “Report the Results of Your Cleanup.”

Consider creating a summary that can be mailed or emailed to the participants. Include the number of people that helped, sponsors and supporters of your cleanup, trash totals and photos of everyone hard at work. People will feel proud of the results, and will be excited about your next cleanup.



## River Safety Tips

Minimize your group's exposure to risk to prevent injuries. Share some of this information with your volunteers in advance.

### Understand Your Group

- Know the limits of your group. Be it age, skill or comfort level with the tasks at hand; don't ask your volunteers to do more than they are able.
- Inform parents and guardians that they are responsible for the supervision of their children. Do your best to see that each child has adult supervision.



Do your best to see that everyone has a fun, safe and constructive day on the river.

### Proper Dress

- Encourage volunteers to wear work gloves and dress for the weather. For cold weather, encourage volunteers to wear synthetics or wool.
- Long sleeves and pants help protect skin from poisonous plants, bug bites and sunburn. Even in hot weather, lightweight long sleeve shirts and pants are strongly recommended.
- Encourage participants to wear hats and work boots (preferably waterproof), or waders if volunteers will get in the water; sneakers and sandals are discouraged.

### Know your Section of River

- Scout the section of river you are going to cleanup beforehand.
- Look for emergency take outs throughout the section and mark them on a map.

### Check the Weather, Know your River's Level and What the Level Means

- If water levels are above average do not attempt your cleanup, postpone it until water levels are safe.
- If heavy rain is forecasted, consider postponing. Since rivers are dynamic drainages, in rainy situations, levels may change rapidly.



## Allow Plenty of Time for your Cleanup and Don't get Caught in the Dark

- Allow extra time for trashbag pickup, lunch, rest, plus some extra time at the end.

## Identify and be Aware of the Risks in the Outdoors

- Snakes, insects, poison ivy, poison oak, other wildlife, etc.
- Extreme weather (heat, cold, sun, wind).
- Know where the closest medical facilities are.

✓ Everyone should bring a bottle of water, and some snacks or lunch for energy.

## Use Common Sense

- If it sounds, looks or smells dangerous, it could be. Stay safe.

## Safety Tools for Your Cleanup

### First Aid Kit

For large cleanups, consider bringing several first aid kits to accommodate a group spread out over a section of river. A standard kit bought from any local outfitter/drug store/gear shop is usually a good bet. Ask your volunteers who has first aid/CPR training or is a medical professional.

### Protective Gear

Many hazards and dangers on the river can easily be avoided with simple safety gear and clothing choices like the following:

- Work gloves
- Work boots with hard soles
- Protective eye-wear, if working with tools and/or machinery
- Personal Flotation Device (life-vest, PFD)
- Sunscreen
- Insect repellent
- Hand sanitizer



## On the Water

When traveling on a body of water in a group it is a good idea to establish ground rules to help the trip go smoothly and safely.

### **ALWAYS WEAR YOUR PFD (Life Jacket)!**

#### **Appoint a “Lead” Boat (Front) and “Sweep” Boat (Rear)**

- Ask everyone not to go in front of the lead or behind the sweep.
- The lead and sweep should be more experienced boaters, and should both be equipped with first-aid kits.



People are more important than boats, gear and trash; take care of yourself and others first.

#### **Create an Agreeable Set of Rational Safety Guidelines**

- No diving or jumping into the water, no deliberate boat tipping, etc.
- If you can't see the last boat in the group stop until you can.

#### **Appoint a Group Manager for Each Boat**

- Appoint someone to make decisions in case of an emergency, as decisions by consensus don't always work in emergency situations.

#### **Stay Together**

- By staying together, everyone can help each other and decisions can be made quickly.

#### **Have an Emergency Plan**

- Prepare a tip sheet with emergency phone numbers and evacuation routes.

#### **Identify and Avoid Hazards**

- Look out for strainers (trees and debris buildups in the water).
- Look out for drops, dams and other more difficult river features.
- Steer away from fisherman, swimmers and other boaters.



## Handle Trash

Garbage in the river can be dirty, rusty, slimy, and sometimes sharp. Use caution when handling trash from the river to avoid cuts and abrasions. (include the following sentence in this section...Don't be afraid to ask for help; don't try to lift heavy objects alone.

## Avoid Hazardous Materials

- Drums or containers may contain toxic waste.
- Needles and other biohazard waste are dangerous.
- Handle these items with caution: broken glass, aerosol cans, gas cans and other containers with chemical residues or traces of volatile materials.
- Never handle found live ammunition or explosives – immediately alert the authorities if these items are discovered during your cleanup.
- Wear all safety gear if handling hazardous materials such as glass and metal containers.



*Sample Liability Waiver*

## Volunteer Release and Acknowledgement of Risk

[ORGANIZER’S LOGO]

[NAME OF CLEANUP]

[LOCATION]

### DRAFT

Name of Volunteer (please print):

Address:

City:

Zip:

Work/Day Phone:

Fax:

Home/Night Phone:

Cell:

Email:

Date/Location of Volunteer Activity:

Organizer:

This document must be signed by all volunteers. If the volunteer is under the age of 18, this document must be signed by his or her legal guardian.

*Volunteer Activity:* I am donating my time and services without any compensation and shall at no time be considered an employee or independent contractor of the [year] [Your Organization’s Name and Name of Cleanup] Event. I understand that no organization is providing insurance coverage for me.

*Release from Liability:* In consideration for being allowed to participate in [YOUR EVENT] as a volunteer, I, binding my heirs, executors, administrators, and assigns, hereby fully and forever release, waive, discharge, acquit and exonerate the organizer of [YOUR EVENT] in which I am participating, AARP, and all National River Cleanup [year] sponsors, including American Rivers, and all National River Cleanup volunteers and affiliates, from any and all claims, actions, causes of action, remedies and complaints of any kind, except for claims for gross negligence or willful misconduct, which I have or may have, whether known or unknown, arising out of or relating to the [year] [YOUR EVENT] or my volunteer work for this event, including



specifically all claims for personal injury, paralysis, wrongful death, property damage and any other injury I may sustain.

*Assumption of Risk:* I assume all risks of participating in [YOUR EVENT] and full responsibility for my conduct and actions, including any injury to myself or others or damage to property that may result while volunteering. I understand that the [Your Organization's Name] Organizer, AARP, and National River Cleanup Sponsors, including American Rivers, are not responsible for conditions I create for myself or those created by other volunteers or participants. I am aware that the [YOUR EVENT] activities may be hazardous, involving risk of serious bodily injury, death, or property damage. I am voluntarily participating in these activities with knowledge of the risks. These risks include, but are not limited to, slips, falls, exposure to hazardous materials, objects or persons falling on persons, equipment failure, injury from sharp equipment, improperly administered first aid, lightning strikes, hypothermia, and/or drowning.

I know of no reason, medical or otherwise, that would prevent me from performing the tasks required to participate in this volunteer activity. I will be personally responsible for my own safety during these Activities and assume all risks and accept full and complete responsibility for any and all damages and personal injury of any kind, including death. I recognize [Your Organization's Name], AARP, and National River Cleanup sponsors, including American Rivers, and their respective agents, volunteers and affiliates make no representations whatsoever as to whether the \_\_\_\_\_ (name river) is safe or as to whether the safety recommendations provided are comprehensive or adequate.

My signature below affirms that I have read and understood the above document and that I voluntarily, freely and without duress agree to its terms:

Participant:

Legal Parent/Guardian:

Sign \_\_\_\_\_

Sign: \_\_\_\_\_

Print: \_\_\_\_\_

Print: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**EMERGENCY INFORMATION:** In case of emergency, please call:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Allergies: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Medications: \_\_\_\_\_



## Organizing a River Cleanup

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IN CONJUNCTION WITH AMERICAN RIVERS

American Rivers sponsors National River Cleanup to further its mission to protect and restore healthy natural rivers. American Rivers' role is extremely limited; American Rivers acts only as a clearinghouse for volunteers and independent organizers to arrange logistics for river cleanup activities and to provide related information and materials to interested persons. American Rivers is not responsible for the organization of these events or the choice of site, organizers, volunteers or any incident that may occur at any cleanup site, nor does American Rivers design, supervise, control or monitor these events in any way.



*Sample News Release*

## DRAFT

### LOCAL GROUP TO CLEAN LITTER FROM [YOUR RIVER]

Volunteers Pitch In as Part of the National River Cleanup Program

#### DATE

Contact: **Organization Contact**

American Rivers: 202-347-7550 (Optional)

**City, State**– Local citizens are banding together to tackle litter in the [Your river], as part of the National River Cleanup [year]. [Your organization] will conduct a river, estuary and dune cleanup with the help of [number] volunteers on date and time.

“[Your organization] is dedicated to protecting [Your river] because a healthy community starts with a healthy river. Our volunteers are excited to pitch in because a cleaner river is a healthier river,” said [Contact, Position, Organization].

National River Cleanup, sponsored by American Rivers, is a series of community-based stream cleanups happening nationwide. This popular annual event raises public awareness of the magnitude of trash accumulating in our nation’s waterways. [Your organization] will be participating along with tens of thousands of volunteers taking part in hundreds of cleanups across the country to remove trash from local rivers and streams. Learn more about National River Cleanup at [www.AmericanRivers.org/cleanup](http://www.AmericanRivers.org/cleanup).

“The [Your river] is so important to our community that we’ve got to take every opportunity we can to protect it, for us and for future generations. Keeping it clean is one way that citizens can do their part for the river we all love,” said [Contact].

“It’s thrilling to see so many people across the nation pitching in to protect their local river or favorite stream,” said Rebecca Wodder, President of American Rivers, the organization that sponsors National River Cleanup. “We applaud the work of [Your organization] not just for speaking out for [Your river] but for taking action to keep it healthy.”

#### Insert details about your cleanup

For more information on river cleanups happening throughout the watershed, around the state or across the country, visit: [www.AmericanRivers.org/cleanup](http://www.AmericanRivers.org/cleanup).



## Organizing a River Cleanup

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IN CONJUNCTION WITH AMERICAN RIVERS

Cleaning up a river is one of many ways AARP encourages people to get involved locally. Visit [www.CreateTheGood.org](http://www.CreateTheGood.org) for more ideas as well as a database where you can post or find volunteer opportunities in your community.

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Insert details about **[Your organization]**

American Rivers is the leading national organization fighting for healthy rivers so communities can thrive. American Rivers protects and restores America's rivers for the benefit of people, wildlife and nature. Founded in 1973, American Rivers has more than 65,000 members and supporters nationwide, with offices in Washington, DC and nationwide. Visit [www.AmericanRivers.org](http://www.AmericanRivers.org)