



# They Clean Up Nicely

For the folks at Keep Nature Wild, the mission is simple: Clean up the Earth. And they're true to their word. Since 2016, with the help of tens of thousands of volunteers, the organization has removed nearly 250,000 pounds of trash from the great outdoors. But they're not done. By 2023, they plan on pushing that total to a million.

*By Chels Knorr / Photographs by Mark Lipczynski*

**E**rin Mason carries dozens of plastic straws, a felt-tip marker, a soda can and several empty chip bags. Nicholas Garcia carries a small piece of rotted pallet wood and a tangle of string. Clara Missman carries electrical wire, a glass bottle and fast-food wrappers.

This gathering — a Keep Nature Wild (KNW) trash pickup event in east Mesa — started mid-morning, under a green tent set up in the back corner of a dirt parking lot. Cameron Jarman, one of the founders of KNW, delivered some simple instructions while standing in the bed of a truck: Pick up trash, but with a few caveats. Watch out for snakes. Beware of glass. Don't pick up needles. Drink plenty of water.

Owned and managed by the Arizona State Land Department, this land is wide open, a natural desert area full of native plants. It's not a state park or a recreation area — it's just land. On one side of the

plot is a public park. On the other, several hundred yards away and separated by a fence, is the State Route 202 freeway.

Forrest and Parker Leeper — ages 6 and 4, respectively — are out here with kid-size trash pickers and buckets they decorated with stickers and Sharpies. Kids are out here in strollers. Others are running circles around their parents. This is a multipurpose Saturday morning — a teachable moment, and a chance to run off some energy. The parents don't seem fazed by the dangers they might find — the snakes or glass or needles — but they keep a close eye on their curious kids. These parents carry a responsibility to teach their kids the price of littering.

You can tell a lot about people, and what they care about, based on what they carry.

#### **What people carry varies by size and weight.**

The kids pounce on trash — picking up labels and empty water bottles, and adding them to bags their parents are carrying.

**A Keep Nature Wild volunteer holds a bag of trash collected during a recent cleanup event in east Mesa.**



The Leeper boys, together, carry a lizard. Kara, their mother, carries the weight of teaching her children to make environmentalism a habit.

Strong men and women carry truck tires and trailer parts and the remnants of an old, burned boat. Someone left an entire fridge out here. Participants carry these parts and the fridge contents back to the dumpster.

**The things people carry are largely driven by someone else's convenience.**

Among these things are rims, stripped car wheels and a shopping cart without any wheels. There is a slew of construction materials, piping and electrical wire from demo jobs — items simply easier to drive out to the middle of the desert and dump than to dispose of properly.

Other participants carry bags filled with plastic foam egg cartons and single-use plastic bags. There are rusty paint buckets, recyclable water bottles in every size, and shotgun shells. There is a banged-up car hood with chipped paint. Rachel McDermotte carries a pool noodle, a tape measure and the shards of a broken sink.

**The things they carry are determined, to some extent, by experience and responsibility.**

Daniel Richerson, a former police officer, carries the duty of monitoring and cleaning up. He's a natural resource manager for the Arizona State Land Department — and one of just two people in the state with that job. He and his counterpart are responsible for millions of acres of land the department owns.

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Cleanup efforts like this often are not possible because of a lack of resources and manpower, so when Richerson connected with KNW about this project, he was excited to have access to 100 eager volunteers for a few hours.

Missman, a natural resources and ecology student, carries the burden of wanting to keep trash out of the animal and plant habitat. “The problem is getting worse,” she says. “I want to make a difference.”

Sean Huntington, KNW's other founder, carries his camera, a frustration about the littered ground he stands on and the chagrin of a community he helped to create.

Jarman gets called away shortly after the trash pickup starts. Someone has come across a needle, and he must run interference. He picks up the syringe, with the protection of gloves and a plastic bag for proper disposal, and carries it to his car. This is a common, though easily mitigated, occurrence during these trash events.

Jarman and Huntington both have the always-disheveled look of outdoorsmen: a permanent state of hat hair, mountain-man scruff and never-spotless boots. They're joined by Jarman's wife, Casi, who's also Huntington's sister. You can tell she's most herself in jeans and a cotton T-shirt. The three form the perfect balance of personality you want along no matter the adventure: They're equal parts “roll with the punches” and energetic.

Keep Nature Wild grew about as organically as the nature it's protecting. The Jarmans, avid hikers, began keeping track of their treks in 2013. They documented them — with pictures and simple

descriptions — on Arizona Hikers Guide, a blog that promised straightforward, no-nonsense hiking information, rather than the technical and overwhelming guides that blanketed the internet.

The couple had friends, and friends of friends, asking if they could lead weekend hikes. They did until their few friends grew to 30, and then 120, and they realized they were doing unintentional but obvious damage to the trails. But how could they leverage this interest in the outdoors and community for good?

The Jarmans joined Huntington and his wife, Shawni, to organize a cleanup event at the Salt River in 2017. It was early in the morning and pouring rain, and they figured it might flop and be just the core team doing all the work. But it wasn't. Hundreds of volunteers showed up, and the group collected 17,000 pounds of trash. Participants loved meeting like-minded people and appreciated the minimal commitment involved. So, KNW scheduled another event. And another.

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“People have made some of their best friends at these pickup events,” Casi Jarman adds.

Around the same time as the first cleanup event, the partners launched an apparel business. That came after they had commissioned a logo for the KNW website: a simple, black and white outline of the state with a pine tree flanked by two saguaro cactuses, representing the diverse landscape of Arizona. The logo took off. Pretty soon, it was on notebooks, bumper stickers and windows around the state.

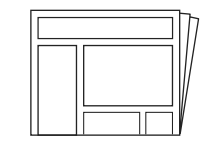
Jarman and Huntington began researching the manufacturing and printing process, thinking it would be cool if they could print up a few shirts with their logo. Even with just a couple of shirts in mind, they wanted to ethically source the apparel and use a local screen printer.

The operation long existed as a basement project, complicated by the fact that the Jarmans lived in Flagstaff and the Huntingtons were in Mesa. Eventually, the Jarmans moved back to Mesa and KNW moved from basement to warehouse.

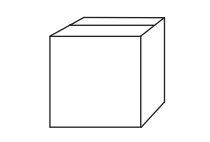
Now, the partners work on Keep Nature Wild full time. It's both their livelihood and their way to give back to the Earth. As leaders of a small team, they do everything, but Jarman focuses on the products and events, while Huntington does the digital strategy and execution. Casi and Shawni work outside the company, but attend events and stay heavily involved in core company decisions.

The team, which has grown to include a few more hires, is all local. The apparel is shipped

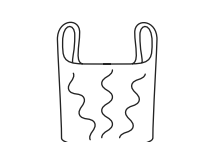
## DECOMPOSITION TIMELINE



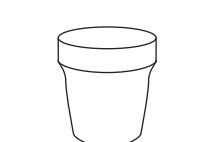
Newspaper: 6 weeks



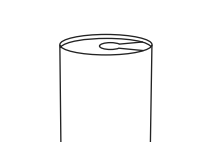
Cardboard box: 2 months



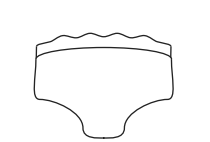
Plastic grocery bag: 10 to 20 years



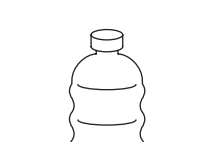
Plastic foam cup: 50 years



Aluminum can: 200 years



Disposable diaper: 450 years



Plastic bottle: 450 years



Fishing line: 600 years



A young volunteer hunts for trash.

directly to a nearby screen printer. The team picks up the apparel when it's finished and takes it back to the warehouse, where it's sorted, labeled, tagged and eventually shipped to buyers. This eliminates unnecessary plastic packaging and shipping. Although T-shirts are their main sellers, they have other items for sale online and at a storefront, Mezona Market, in downtown Mesa.

From the beginning, the team set aside 10 percent of profits, which they planned to use to give back. “We didn't want to be driven exclusively by money,” Jarman says. With this money, they began hosting more pickup events, and they've since committed to picking up a pound of trash for every item they sell. Their goal is 1 million pounds of trash by 2023.

Because the team is just a few people, geography is limiting. But they didn't want this to hinder the impact people could have, so they created Wild Keepers, a program that allows anyone, no matter where they live, to be involved in KNW's pickup efforts. Each month, the team adds up all the trash from its events and the trash the Wild Keepers have reported, and publishes an impact report.

This company and the characters who run it can accurately be judged by the things they carry: a love for the outdoors and taking care of it, a knack for creating opportunities for a community to gather, the burden and duty of joint environmental responsibility, and leaving land better than they found it. And, of course, thousands of pounds of people's discarded trash. [AH](#)

For more information about Keep Nature Wild or to volunteer, visit [keepnaturewild.com](http://keepnaturewild.com).



Keep Nature Wild co-founders Cameron Jarman (left) and Sean Huntington address volunteers at the Mesa cleanup event.