

MR CLEAN

Sick of seeing mountains of rubbish on his beloved French Alps, 25-year-old Arian Lemal, nicknamed Sweeper of the Summits by friends, began picking up what others had discarded. His cleaning urge has seen him spend back-breaking months packing out hundreds of kilos from the Alps, South America's Aconcagua (where he collected 150kg of litter in 33 days), and joining an expedition to the Himalayas to clean Kanchenjunga's base camp. He's inspired kids at more than 150 schools in France to keep the mountains clean and now he's in New Zealand studying for his masters in environmental policy; and still picking up rubbish everywhere he goes.



The 'Sweeper of the Summits' with some of the 150kg of rubbish he collected on Aconcagua

What's the most bizarre rubbish you have found?

Lots of rubbish in the French Alps was handkerchiefs. My record of handkerchiefs in one morning of walking is 137. But probably the worst thing I've seen is 3kg of old batteries on Aconcagua. The batteries were lying in the area where we collected snow for our water so the people who left them behind polluted the water of other climbers. It's completely disrespectful.

Have you ever confronted anyone for littering?

I've never seen anybody in the mountains drop rubbish. If I did, I would have talked to them to try and understand why they did it and why they couldn't put it in their pocket and bring it off the mountain. Many of the people who see me in the mountains say thank you and keep up the good work. I always wish they would say they would do something themselves as well.

Why do you think people drop their rubbish?

I've got lots of theories. Some people don't have the education and don't think about it. Some people are lazy and don't want to put it in their backpack or pocket. Others just don't care about the environment. They just come and enjoy it and then get out of it. It's like ticking a list.

How does New Zealand compare in cleanliness?

I've found very little rubbish here in the mountains, but I suspect the Department of Conservation rangers do some cleaning up. We don't have DoC rangers back in the French Alps, and that's probably why there is that difference. But also maybe because there are lots of signs and communication, particularly at DoC huts and DoC information centres, asking people to take their rubbish out.

How can we help keep the backcountry clean?

The easiest thing is to carry a plastic bag with you when you go into the mountains so you can take down your own rubbish and if you find some rubbish you're willing to take down, just put it in your plastic bag. It's very easy and at the end of the day, when you come down with your rubbish and somebody else's rubbish, you know the mountains are cleaner. It's an amazing feeling.

Will you ever stop being the Sweeper of the Summits?

No. In fact I'm hoping to find sponsorship for a five-year project beginning in 2010 where I will spend six months in the mountains cleaning up and then spend six months giving free school talks to raise awareness for kids. The kids who may be spectators now need to be the actors in the future.

- Alistair Hall