

The Sweeper of Summits

Wild speaks to Arian Lemaal about one of the main problems humans leave behind in their interaction with wild places—rubbish

In Australia we are fortunate that many of our wild places are free of rubbish; the same cannot be said of many other parts of the world, particularly Europe and the developing world. Arian Lemaal is a young French climber and walker who became fed up with climbing mountains that looked like rubbish dumps and decided to do something about it. In 2006, aged 22, he soloed Argentina's Mt Aconcagua, the highest mountain in the Americas. Appalled at the rubbish, he returned a year later to clean up the mountain: 'During 33 days on the mountain, I took down 150 kilograms of rubbish left behind by disrespectful climbers.' To clean up the slopes of the mountain he undertook many trips up and down—the equivalent of climbing Aconcagua four times—each time, with 15 to 20 kilograms of rubbish on his back. Friends soon nicknamed him the 'Sweeper of Summits'. In the summer of 2007 he spent three months cleaning up rubbish in the French Alps, each day bending over hundreds of times to pick up litter. A French manufacturing company, Millet, heard about his efforts and offered him a place on a team trekking into Kanchenjunga base camp. There they removed 130 kilograms of rubbish. When at home in France, Arian visits schools, giving free talks to highlight environmental issues and educating students about their future interactions with the natural world. At present Arian is living in New Zealand, where he is finishing his masters in environmental management.

What first motivated you to start cleaning up the mountains?

First of all, my motivation comes from the energy, pleasure and excitement that the mountains and the animals give me. The immense excitement and energy that develops inside me when I'm in the wild is overwhelming and powerful. Secondly, being a role model for kids and raising environmental awareness.

When you are confronted with all the rubbish people leave behind, does it ever make you angry or feel like you are wasting your time?

I do get frustrated and angry, but then the environment says 'thank you' with the birds singing or the leaves dancing in the air. I also keep in mind that raising awareness will eventually make a difference. My motto is 'our planet deserves an effort'. That's what I remind myself when it's a bit rough, either because of poor weather or because of the amount of rubbish I need to pick up. It is never a waste of time as long as I can give school talks and use the media to spread the word.



Some of the delights Arian found in the Alps around Chamonix. *Arian Lemaal*

What is the strangest rubbish you have found in your travels?

The strangest rubbish is four shredded car tyres at 2000 metres above Chamonix. I have no idea what they were doing there, and what people used them for in the first place. But obviously, they were of no use any more, and were left behind...they were super heavy to carry down. I could also tell you about the coolest thing I've found in the mountains: an old ski from the 1950s on a glacier in the Alps. I also found a Coca-Cola can from 1993 (the expiry date was still readable). If I saw it, someone else must have seen it as well, but nobody picked it up for 14 years!

What future projects do you have planned?

The big project is for 2010. It's a five-year project where I would spend six months of the year cleaning up (Himalayas, Andes, Rockies, Alps, Africa) and six months giving free school talks. But finding sponsorship is not easy... I'm working very hard on that project, and dream-

ing about it every day. Hopefully, it works out, and I can clean more mountains and raise further environmental awareness. I'll let you know how it goes.

What have you found most satisfying about being the 'Sweeper of the Summits'?

My biggest satisfaction from cleaning up the mountains is being able to educate kids and raise environmental awareness amongst them. I try to be a role model for them, and it works! After each school talk, there are always kids that go around the school, pick up rubbish, show it to me, and say, 'You see, I helped the planet, our planet deserves an effort'. It's an amazing feeling! Later on, the classes organise a cleanup project, then they send me the pictures and the 'tales' of the day. I also feel a great deal of satisfaction on my different projects when people watching or encountering me help me collect rubbish. They did their bit, and that's great!

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