BUTTS

In 1975 in a small exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Irving Penn introduced the world to the first photographs of cigarette butts. If it hadn't been for Penn's butt photographs, I never would have thought that it would be possible for me to photograph cigarette butts as well.

"BUTTS" is a book about plastic litter, particularly the plastic filters found in cigarette butts. The first part of "BUTTS" outlines the problems caused by cigarette litter. The second part explores some of what is being done to alleviate the problems.

When I first started seriously collecting litter this past summer on my daily walks, I became overwhelmed by the extent of litter I encountered. Cigarette butts were everywhere. I thought that my meager efforts were meaningless. I was discouraged. What difference could I make acting all alone. However, after a bit of research, I discovered that I wasn't acting alone. There was a whole world of others – individuals and organizations – collecting cigarette butts. And most importantly, I discovered that the butts: paper, tobacco and filters, could all be recycled into useful products. I was encouraged to keep collecting butts.

I currently save the butts I collect and ship them to TerraCycle free of charge for recycling. I am now quite happy to be a committed "butt picker."

Enjoy,
Jim Force, January, 2026
Calgary, Alberta

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Cigarette butts are an enduring, widespread, and hazardous form of litter. They represent the most prevalent kind of waste abandoned in nature by consumers. Among the litter gathered from streets, parks, and beaches, cigarette butts are the most frequently encountered form of debris. It is estimated that 4.5 trillion cigarette butts become litter every year. That’s enough to fill 30 cargo ships or 60,000 shipping containers!

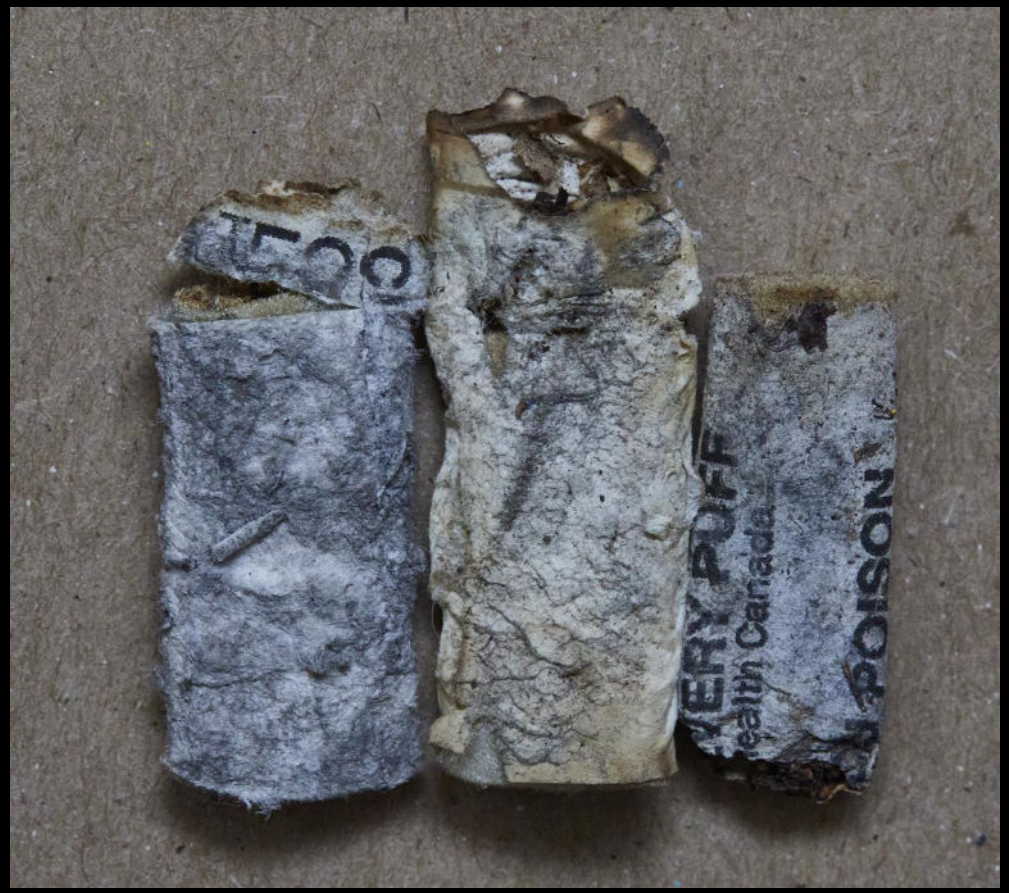
Cigarette filters are not harmless, they are made of cellulose acetate, a man-made, single-use plastic material. Each filter is composed of roughly 15,000 microfiber strands, which decompose into microplastics. In total, cigarette butts contain more than 4,000 chemicals, more than 50 of which are considered human carcinogens. Because the toxic metals and chemicals in littered cigarette butts accrue over time, they are more harmful than general plastic waste.

After cigarette butts are discarded, they can leach arsenic, lead, cadmium, nicotine and other toxins into soil and water, contaminating ecosystems and harming wildlife and people. The impact is especially noticeable in water ecosystems, where even low concentrations of these chemicals can harm or kill aquatic life. Studies have shown that cigarette butt leachates can be lethal to fish and other aquatic organisms within just 96 hours of exposure.

Cigarette butts are the second most frequently encountered type of single-use microplastics on the seabed of the Mediterranean. Worldwide they account for 845,000 tons of litter. Tens of thousands of cigarette butts are littered every second. By 2030, there could be more cigarette butts than fish in the oceans if littering is not reduced. Cigarette butts outweigh all other forms of ocean trash by 130%.

Cigarette butts are one of the most commonly ingested items by marine life, second only to microplastics. They have been observed in the stomach contents of marine animals such as fish, whales, turtles, and birds that feed on fish and other sea creatures. Microplastics from cigarette butts have even been found in human tissues. A single cigarette butt can pollute up to 1,000 litres of water. The costs of environmental pollution caused by plastics in cigarette butts and packaging amount to an estimated $26 billion US every year.

Cigarette butt pollutants don’t just affect water, they also seep into the soil. In agricultural or urban areas, cigarette butts can alter the nutrient composition of the soil, making it harder for plants to grow. Nicotine, for example, has been shown to act as a natural pesticide, but in high concentrations, it can inhibit the germination and growth of plants entirely.



Around the world, organizations, communities and cities have organized various litter prevention events, campaigns and programs. Programs such as Adopt a Highway, Adopt a Park, Adopt a Block, Pathway and River Clean-ups are common as well as various types of litter traps used in storm drains and rivers. These types of clean-ups generally include cigarette butts. Unfortunately, the butts aren't always separated out and sent off for recycling. Consequently, they end up in landfills, which is better than in water systems. However, The Hubbub Foundation's Ballot Bin is an exception.

The Ballot Bin is a customisable voting ashtray that has been proven to cut cigarette litter by up to 73%. The Ballot Bin started in the UK in 2015 to nudge smokers to vote rather than throw their butts on the ground. The Ballot Bin engages smokers to ‘vote’ with their butts. Each Ballot Bin has one question and two responses along with a window to display the used butts, so a public opinion poll builds competition as old butts pile up on either side. Questions can be tailored to things like the location, community or a seasonal event. There are now over 5,000 Ballot Bins in 43 countries around the world, collecting an estimated 15 million cigarette butts a year.

https://hubbub.org.uk/ballot-bin

Cigarette butts can be recycled at TerraCycle anytime of year for free. Simply box up the cigarette butts and download a free shipping label and send it off to TerraCycle. TerraCycle's Cigarette Waste Recycling Program has recycled over a quarter-billion cigarette butts to date. This program allows for the recycling of cigarette waste that would normally go to landfills or be littered on the ground or waterways.

https://www.terracycle.com/en-CA/

Cigarette butt recycling involves separating out the tobacco and paper which are dried and mixed with other organic materials to create compost. The filters, made of cellulose acetate, are sterilized and turned into a powder. The cellulose acetate powder is used in the manufacturing of recycled plastic lumber. This lumber can be used to build picnic tables, fencing, decks, playground equipment and park benches – park your butt on a butt bench!

The Caesars Windsor Hotel & Casino in Ontario has recycled more than 5.9 million cigarette butts via TerraCycle. As a result of Windsor's participation in the TerraCycle program more than $3,500 has been donated to Essex Region Conservation Foundation and the Windsor Essex County Humane Society.

In partnership with TerraCycle, The Carnival Cruise Line has collected and recycled over 42,500,000 cigarette butts since 2015.

In the first 10 months, a single vessel of the Disney Fantasy cruise Line collected and recycled over 740,000 cigarette butts through the TerraCycle program.

Chumash Casino Resort in California has sent nearly 29 million cigarette butts to TerraCycle for recycling.

The Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership and the City of Pittsburgh have collected and recycled over 3,500,000 Cigarette butts via TerraCycle.

The Keep New Hanover, NC, Beautiful Cigarette Recycling Program in conjunction with TerraCycle has collected and recycled over 1.8 million cigarette butts.

On the West Coast of Vancouver Island on World Oceans Day 2022, Jesse Jones' 7' Twin Fish surfboard, dubbed the 'Dart Board,' made history as the first board made from cigarette butts to grace the waters of the Pacific Rim. Jones, a surfboard shaper from Ucluelet, hopes the board will help bring awareness to the issues created by littered cigarette butts found in ocean waters and on beaches.

In 2016-17, the City of Victoria in conjunction with The Surfrider Foundation installed 20 cigarette receptacles to keep cigarette butts off of the city streets, out of the stormwater system and off the beaches. The program has grown to include 105 receptacles, collecting over 400,000 butts per year. The collected butts are sent to TerraCycle for recycling. Recently, the engineering staff of the City of Victoria have developed their own type of canister that meets their needs.

During World Oceans Week in June 2023, the Vancouver Chapter of the Surfrider Foundation unveiled “Ciggy Stardust”, a visual representation of ocean cigarette waste in the form of a sculptured Southern Resident Orca whale covered in over 6,200 sorted and meticulously trimmed cigarette butts found on local beaches.

https://surfrider.ca

Over the course of 13 years, the Surfrider Foundation's "Hold On To Your Butts" program has collected over 1,000,000 butts! That's nearly a ton of butts in weight! These butts are shipped to TerraCycle and recycled into useful items like ashtrays, park benches, tote bags, plant pots, and other cool and very useful items!

Between 2015 and 2025, The Great Canadian Butt Blitz, a partnership of Unsmoke Canada and A Greener Future, mobilized 3,003 volunteers, conducted 5,187 cleanups and collected 6,343,036 discarded cigarette butts. It is recognized as the world's largest cigarette litter cleanup. UNSMOKE hosts two Butt Blitzes each year: one in April and one in September. In 2025, 992 volunteers in 86 unique locations cleaned up over 1 million cigarette butts.

The collected Butt Blitz butts are shipped free of charge to TerraCycle for recycling. As of 2025 the Butt Blitz program has shipped over 3,000 lbs of cigarette butts to be recycled at TerraCycle. TerraCycle provides UNSMOKE Butt Blitz with $1 per pound of butts shipped in. These funds go directly back into the Butt Blitz program.

www.unsmoke.ca/en/community-initiatives/

www.agreenerfuture.ca/the-butt-blitz

In 2022, TerraCycle donated 100 cigarette butt recycling boxes to the City of Calgary. The boxes have been distributed to four Calgary communities: Hillhurst Sunnyside, Crescent Heights, Chinatown and Bridgeland. Between June 2024 and November 2025 the Bridgeland Riverside Community Association has made 3 shipments to TerraCycle with an estimated total of 50,000 cigarette butts. They also participate in the Unsmoke Butt Blitz campaign in April and September each year.

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