ORGANIZER'S GUIDE

Take action in the field to understand and reduce pollution at its source

Retrace!
Collect data, change laws

SURFRIDER FOUNDATION

Summary


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Collect data, change laws

Why Retrace!

Each year, more than **10 million tons of waste** end up in aquatic environments. Over 80% of this waste originates from land-based sources: human activities, poor waste management, runoff, wastewater systems, or transport by wind and waterways. These pollutants have major impacts on aquatic ecosystems: ingestion, entanglement, habitat degradation, and the spread of chemical substances that can accumulate in the food chain.

Building on more than 30 years of citizen engagement by Surfrider, **Retrace!** follows in the footsteps of Initiatives Océanes with a strengthened ambition: **placing citizen science and the use of data at the heart of civic action.**

Retrace! aims at understanding the origin of waste, identifying its sources, and taking effective action to reduce pollution at its source, across Europe.

The concept behind Retrace!

Retrace! is a **citizen-driven program for collecting, analyzing, and quantifying aquatic litter**, designed to better understand pollution mechanisms and take effective action at the source.

In practice, the program is based on several key steps:

1. citizens organize or take part in clean-up operations along **coastlines, riverbanks, or waterways**;
2. the collected waste is **sorted, identified, and counted** according to a standardized protocol at the European scale;
3. the data collected is integrated into a **European database**;
4. this data feeds **scientific research** and **advocacy actions** led by Surfrider.

Each participant thus becomes a true **field investigator**, contributing through their actions to produce reliable and useful data that can help drive changes in practices, regulations, and public policies.

Organizing a Retrace! Clean-up

Organizing a **Retrace!** clean-up is based on a few key steps: registering the event, choosing an accessible and safe location, mobilizing participants, and preparing the necessary equipment. On the day of the event, the organizer welcomes the group, explains the framework of the action, and ensures the smooth running of the clean-up. A simple and clear organization helps guarantee an effective action that contributes useful data to tackle pollution at its source.

Before the collection

1 Register your clean-up

Registering your clean-up on the **Retrace!** platform allows you to:

- make your action visible;
- submit quantification data;
- benefit from Surfrider's support;
- receive a clean-up kit;
- ensure insurance coverage for participants.

The process is simple and guided step by step.

2 Choose the location and date

- The site must be **accessible to the public** and easy to identify.
- It must not present any **major hazards** (unstable cliffs, high-traffic areas, dangerous currents, known chemical pollution).
- Check whether the site is subject **to specific regulations** (protected natural areas, Natura 2000 zones, sites managed **by local authorities or organizations**).
- Contact the local **municipality** or **relevant managers** and inform them in advance.
- Avoid nesting or breeding areas in order to preserve ecosystems.

3 Prepare the quantification in advance

Before the clean-up, the organizer must select the appropriate quantification sheet for their action and review it carefully.

This step helps anticipate the organization of sorting and counting time, assign roles on the day, and clearly present instructions to participants.

Preparing quantification in advance ensures smoother operation, complete and usable data, and a stronger contribution to **Retrace!**'s citizen science objectives.

4 Choose the appropriate quantification sheet

Depending on the type of clean-up and its objectives, two levels of quantification can be used:

A) THE "TOBACCO" SHEET

This sheet, dedicated to tobacco-related waste, focuses on a major and recurring source of pollution.

It includes in particular:

- cigarette butts and filters,
- tobacco packs,
- puffs and e-cigarette refills,
- lighters,
- nicotine pouches,
- other tobacco-related waste.

This sheet is particularly useful for documenting the environmental impact of tobacco and supporting targeted advocacy actions.

B) THE FULL SHEET

More comprehensive, it allows the quantification of a wide range of waste grouped into major categories:

- **common-use plastics** (bottles, caps, food packaging, bags, cups, straws),
- **sanitary and medical** waste (wipes, cotton buds, sanitary products, medicine packaging),
- **unidentifiable plastic** or **polystyrene fragments,**
- waste related to maritime activities (fishing, shellfish farming),
- **metals, glass, textiles, and miscellaneous items,**
- **agricultural or industrial** waste (tarpaulins, biomedia, plastic pellets).

This sheet enables a detailed analysis of the sources of pollution present on-site.

Before the collection

5 Prepare the equipment

A **free kit** can be sent to support you in organizing your **Retrace!** clean-up. Depending on your needs, it may include collection bags, gloves, a banner, and communication materials.

When placing your order, make sure to **select** only the **necessary equipment** and ensure you are available to receive the parcel at the indicated address. Good anticipation helps avoid unnecessary shipments, logistical returns, and unnecessary environmental impact.

6 Mobilize locally

The success of a **Retrace!** clean-up largely depends on diverse local mobilization. It is recommended to involve:

- **local residents;**
- **local associations;**
- **schools;**
- **local businesses;**
- **local media,** to help promote the initiative.

To support this mobilization, Surfrider provides **communication tools** (visuals, digital materials) to help promote the event and increase its visibility before, during, and after the clean-up.

7 Manage registrations

Encourage participants to **register online**.

On the day of the event, complete any missing registrations using the paper list. This step is essential for **insurance coverage** and **participant tracking**.

Collect, engage, understand

Welcoming participants and setting the framework of the action

1 Arriving early on site

It is recommended to arrive **30 minutes to 1 hour before** the start of the clean-up to prepare the area in good conditions. This time allows you to:

- identify the **most relevant areas** for collection before participants arrive;
- spot any constraints or specific features of the site;
- adapt the organization of the clean-up to on-site realities.

This anticipation makes coordination easier on the day and improves the overall quality of the action.

2 Setting up a meeting point

Set up **a clearly identifiable meeting point**, for example using the **Retrace!** banner. This point will serve as a central hub throughout the operation to welcome participants, organize equipment, and coordinate the different steps of the action. It allows you to:

- welcome and gather participants;
- present the framework and objectives of the action;
- centralize and store collection and quantification equipment.

A well-identified meeting point helps ensure smooth organization and clear communication.

3 Presenting the framework of the action

Before starting the clean-up, take a few minutes to:

- introduce **Retrace!** and Surfrider's role;
- explain the **overall flow** of the operation;
- remind participants that the clean-up aims to produce useful data to understand and tackle pollution at its source.

This introduction helps give meaning to participants' engagement.

The **pitch** below is an **example** you can use as is or adapt to your audience to introduce the clean-up and highlight that each participant contributes to a citizen science approach.

4 Defining the spatio-temporal framework

Clearly indicate:

- the **authorized** collection **areas** to avoid any dispersion;
- the **duration of the action**.

To maintain motivation and efficiency:

- plan for **45 minutes to 1 hour** of collection;
- allocate a similar amount of time for **quantification**;
- also allow around **30 minutes** for welcoming participants, discussion time, and closing the operation.

Pitch idea:

Hello everyone, thank you for being here today.

Before we begin, I'll quickly explain why we're here and what we're going to do together.

Today, we're taking part in a RETRACE! clean-up, a program led by Surfrider. The goal is not just to pick up waste, but above all to understand where it comes from so we can act at the source.

In practice, we will first collect waste on this site, then sort and quantify it. Every piece of waste we count becomes data.

This data can, for example, be used to advocate for bans or better regulation of certain types of plastics, to drive changes in industrial practices, or to strengthen existing laws based on evidence gathered in the field.

In other words, today you are not just picking up waste: you are real field investigators.

We'll start by going over the safety guidelines and how the clean-up will be organized, and then we'll take action. Thank you again for your commitment, and have a great clean-up everyone!"

Safety guidelines and clean-up organization

Participant safety

1. **Wearing gloves** is **mandatory** throughout the clean-up.
2. Waste must be handled **only with protective equipment**.
3. Do not **touch your face** with soiled gloves.
4. Be especially cautious with **sharp or hazardous objects** (glass, metal, syringes).
5. Hazardous waste must be handled carefully and reported to the organizer.
6. **Children must be accompanied by an adult at all times.**

Respect for the environment

You can introduce a fun dimension (teams, small challenges) to boost motivation.

1. **Only human-origin waste** should be collected.
2. Natural elements (wood, seaweed, drift lines) must remain in place.
3. The clean-up must not damage the natural environment or disturb wildlife and flora.

Equipment distribution

1. 1 glove per person; 1 pair per child;
2. 1 plastic bag and 1 jute bag per group;
3. plastic bags for small waste and fragments;
4. jute bags for heavy, sharp, or bulky waste.

ANIMATION

Raising awareness during the action

Retrace! is not limited to collecting and quantifying waste: it is also a moment for **exchanges and understanding** the mechanisms of aquatic pollution. To support organizers, Surfrider provides an **educational tool based on images**, designed to stimulate collective imagination and encourage participants to speak up.

To lead this awareness session:

- select a **maximum** of **3 to 4 images** to keep the format dynamic;
- present the images **one by one**;
- clearly introduce **the theme associated** with each image;
- let participants freely share their thoughts and observations;
- complement the discussion with your knowledge and the **information provided on the back of the images**.

This activity helps give **meaning to the action**, connect collected waste to broader pollution issues, and strengthen participants' engagement.

→ Find the **full facilitation guide** to prepare and deepen this discussion session..

Quantifying waste: the core of Retrace!

Quantification transforms a clean-up into a **citizen science action**.

After the clean-up, waste is sorted, identified, and counted according to t**he quantification sheet you have selected**.

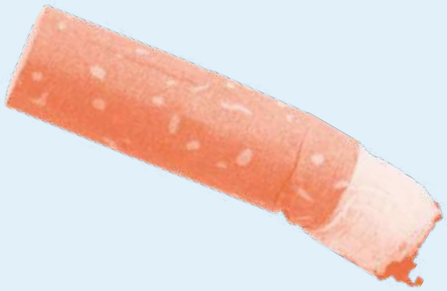
Quantification organization

Groups of up to 15–20 people

For small to medium-sized clean-ups, opt for a simple and clear organization.

1. **Form pairs** (or groups of three if needed) to facilitate waste handling and note-taking.
2. **Assign one waste category per pair**, ensuring they clearly understand what is (and is not) included in that category.
3. Start with **large items** (fishing nets, plastic bags, bottles, large packaging), which are easier to identify and sort.
4. Then move on to smaller or fragmented waste.
5. **Each pair is responsible for:**
   - → sorting the waste corresponding to their category,
   - → **counting it carefully**,
   - → recording the data on the quantification sheet.

This approach helps reduce errors, involve all participants, and make quantification smoother.



Groups of more than 20 people

For clean-ups with many participants, organizing into two teams is recommended to improve efficiency.

1. **Assign category coordinators:**
   - → each coordinator is positioned around the quantification area,
   - → they are responsible for counting only their assigned category(ies),
   - → this ensures better data reliability.
2. **Create a central sorting team:**
   - → this team stands at the center of the quantification area,
   - → They sort the waste and distribute it to the relevant coordinators,
   - → It ensures that each item is counted only once.

This organization allows large volumes of waste to be processed while maintaining good data quality and a strong group dynamic.

It improves efficiency and reduces errors.

Management of collected waste

At the end of a **Retrace!** clean-up, the organizer is **responsible for the collected waste** and must ensure it is directed to appropriate treatment channels.

1. **Glass and metal waste** (bottles, cans, caps, metal objects) can be directed to **recycling streams**, provided they are not excessively contaminated with sand or sludge.

2. **Highly degraded plastics**, which have remained in the environment for a long time (exposure to UV, abrasion, and salinity), are generally non-recyclable and should be directed to **general waste streams**, according to local guidelines.

3. Certain specific or hazardous waste (syringes, medical waste, sharp objects) must be handled with **particular care**, in accordance with procedures established by local authorities.

It is important to note that, even though some recycling channels for marine plastics exist, they remain **limited, costly, and energy-intensive**. **Retrace!**'s priority is therefore to **reduce waste at the source**, using collected data to act on the root causes of pollution.

Closing your Retrace! Clean-up

In the days following your Retrace! clean-up, several actions are essential to properly close the operation and ensure its impact.

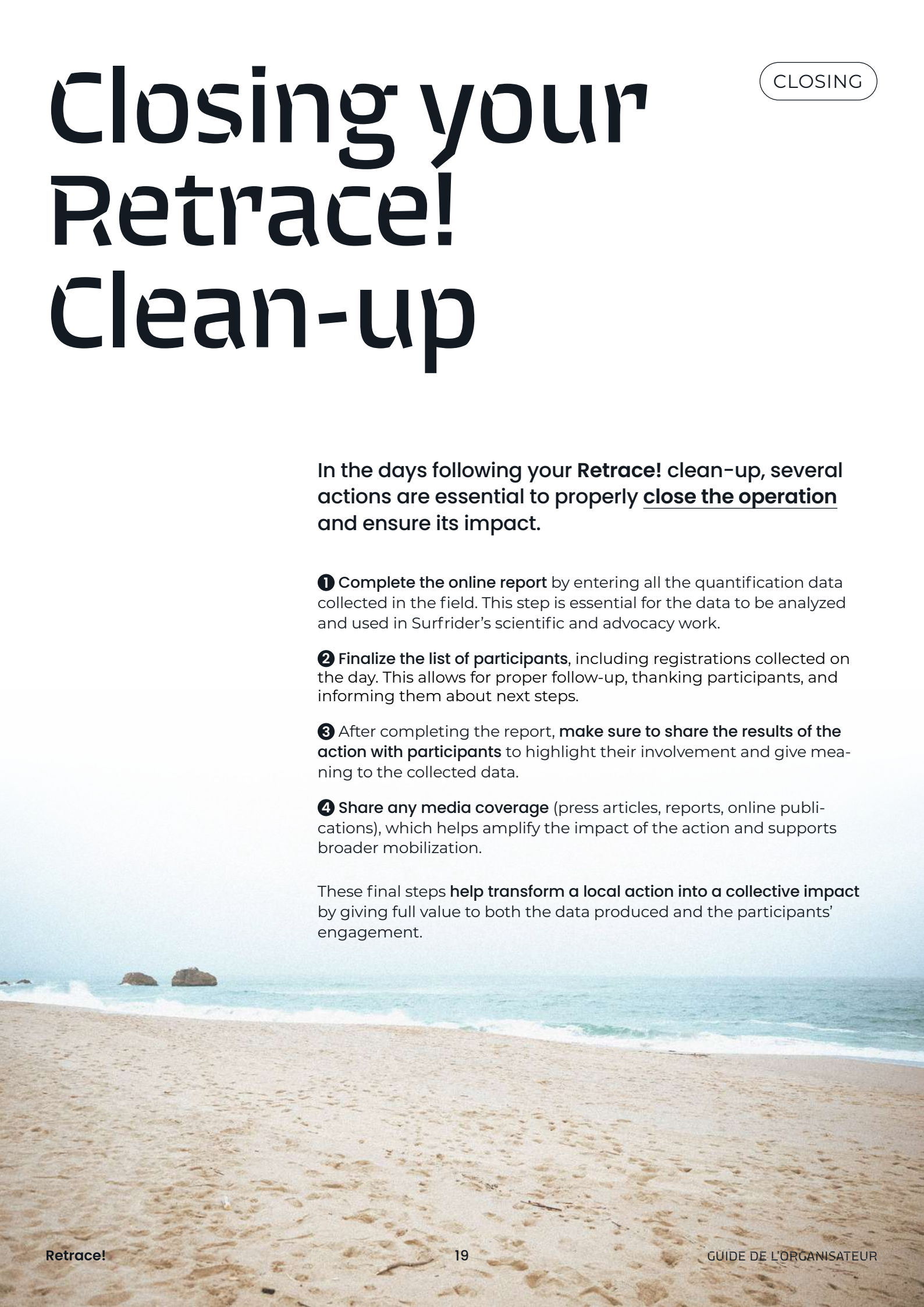
❶ **Complete the online report** by entering all the quantification data collected in the field. This step is essential for the data to be analyzed and used in Surfrider's scientific and advocacy work.

❷ **Finalize the list of participants**, including registrations collected on the day. This allows for proper follow-up, thanking participants, and informing them about next steps.

❸ After completing the report, **make sure to share the results of the action with participants** to highlight their involvement and give meaning to the collected data.

❹ **Share any media coverage** (press articles, reports, online publications), which helps amplify the impact of the action and supports broader mobilization.

These final steps **help transform a local action into a collective impact** by giving full value to both the data produced and the participants' engagement.



Thank you!

Retrace! is not just a clean-up.

It is a citizen tool to produce data, understand pollution, and take action at the source.

Express checklist - Retrace! Organizer

Before

1. ☐ Clean-up registered
2. ☐ Location confirmed (authorized, safe)
3. ☐ Kit received
4. ☐ Participants mobilized
5. ☐ Awareness tool prepared
6. ☐ Quantification sheet ready

During

7. ☐ Welcome + Retrace! pitch
8. ☐ Safety instructions delivered
9. ☐ Clean-up launched (45–60 min)
10. ☐ Quantification completed
11. ☐ Awareness session conducted

After

12. ☐ Waste properly sorted and directed
13. ☐ Report completed on the Retrace! website
14. ☐ Participants added + feedback collected