



Keeping Nature in Mind: Green Picnics

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My idea of a picnic is lingering over a delicious gourmet meal under the spreading branches of a tree at my favorite park, in the company of adult friends who understand the art of conversation. However, the picnics I *usually* attend consist of sitting at a picnic table, trying to avoid splinters while gobbling hot dogs and chips, elbow to elbow with my kids and other people's kids, sweating stickily in the humid air of an Indiana summer.

On one of these picnics several years ago, as we swept up the trash in preparation for a hike, I noticed what we tossed. Like many moms, I assumed my kids wanted "fun food" to eat outside. After the meal (which my distracted children barely touched), I filled the trash can with pudding cups, soft drink cans, water bottles, yogurt containers, plastic forks and spoons, paper napkins, paper plates, and wads of plastic wrap.

I can do better than this, I thought guiltily.

Since then, when my family eats al fresco, I pack a different picnic, one that reduces my own contribution to the trash burden, especially at parks. National and state parks spend thousands of dollars every year cleaning up, recycling, and landfilling the trash their visitors leave behind. That doesn't include the cost to wildlife and natural habitats. Animals can become entangled in garbage or will sometimes ingest it, only to choke or die of internal damage or starvation. In some parks, exposed trash attracts larger animals that can pose a danger to humans.

I reduce my trash because I'm learning that the stuff we toss here on land can eventually end up in our oceans. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has been observing the growth of "garbage patches" in the Pacific Ocean, places where winds and currents conspire to trap bits of floating trash, mostly plastic. The plastic—coming from land-based sources—might have traveled to the ocean via a storm drain, then a river, eventually finding its way out to sea. It breaks down into microscopic pieces, never actually disappearing from

the ecosystem, becoming ingested by wildlife, littering beaches, and releasing its toxins into our world. Interested in finding out more about the garbage patches? Check out the NOAA website at marinedebris.noaa.gov/info/patch.html.

When I was a Girl Scout, I adored my mess kit, how my fork, spoon, and cup fit ingeniously into the bowl. I have thought about my old mess kit recently in figuring out how to picnic more responsibly. Instead of disposable supplies, I make it my goal to create as little trash as possible.

Rather than processed "snacks," I pack fresh, whole foods, such as fruit, nuts, and cut-up veggies, as well as simple sandwiches or maybe just some fresh bread. Processed goodies aren't filling and they come loaded with sugar and salt. A crunchy apple is sweet, full of fiber, and tastes good with peanut butter or cheese. And it comes with its own wrapper.

I skip the paper napkins. I use old sheets or blankets as tablecloths or picnic blankets and bring along washcloths for spills. Afterward I toss all the soiled stuff in a basket or bag and then unload them into the washer at home.

I use real plates, cups, and flatware. I don't take my good china to the woods, but I do have reusable dishware that I take along if I need it. As with the reusable napkins, I scrape off the excess food into a bag, put the plates back in the cooler or bag, and then off-load them into the dishwasher at home. If we're out for a while, I might bring along a dishpan and wash them up quickly if there's a water source close by. The excess food gets tossed or composted.

Mostly, I just try to keep it simple. Many times I just bring a great loaf of bread, fresh fruit from the farmer's market, some homemade cookies, and our own reusable water bottles. When I'm outside, I'm there to enjoy the handiwork of God and the company of good friends and family. Food is just icing on the cake! ■

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