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# Citizen science in marine litter research: A review

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## Citizen science in Marine Litter Research: A review

### Abstract

Citizen science (CS) can help to tackle the emerging and worldwide problem of marine litter (ML), from collecting data to engaging different stakeholders. We reviewed what and how the scientific literature is reporting CS on ML to identify possible gaps to be improved. The 92 search results (separate occasions when 48 different CS initiatives were discussed across 85 publication records) revealed an under-representation of studies in developing regions. Most search results focused on the science of ML, while information regarding citizen scientists was commonly vague or missing, preventing critical analysis of good practices on this aspect. The studies concentrated on the shoreline and did not harmonize types and sizes of items collected, thus precluding data meta-analyses. The standardisation of CS methods and approaches and the detailed report of aspects related to citizen scientists are essential to support the science we need for the advances in CS efforts to face ML.

**Keywords:** public participation in science, assessment, volunteering, ethics in citizen science, clean-up

### 1 Introduction

To understand and tackle the numerous socio-environmental issues facing our world, we need three main factors: (1) the science to understand the causes, impacts, and potential solutions, (2) society's understanding, will, and ability to act and push decision making, and (3) political will to get science and society on-board to discuss, design, implement and evaluate public policies (Voelker et al., 2021). Consequently, to reach the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, a synergy between these factors is needed (ICS, 2017). Citizen science (CS) can be seen as a process to bring these factors together, particularly science and society, having the potential to contribute to the wealth of research under scientific inquiry, as well as engage society directly with socio-environmental issues

1 (Bonney et al., 2009; Jordan et al., 2016). This engagement, in turn, is hoped to increase knowledge  
2 and concern, and ultimately translate into actions (e.g., from changing individual behaviours to  
3 supporting pro-environmental policies; Hartley et al., 2015; Nelms et al., 2017; Wyles et al., 2017).  
4 There is a growing expectation that CS will help to understand and contribute to solving complex  
5 social-environmental issues, such as marine litter (GESAMP, 2019). However, some important  
6 aspects related to the application of citizen science in the context of marine litter still need to be  
7 assessed and analysed to advance this field of knowledge. In this context, this paper examines how  
8 these different aspects are being reported in the scientific literature that address citizen science  
9 initiatives related to marine litter: what type of citizen science is currently being undertaken, what  
10 contributions are they explicitly noting for science, and what, if any, are they reporting in terms of  
11 their citizen engagement. With this knowledge, we can then identify challenges and opportunities to  
12 further advance citizen science to ensure that we maximise these benefits for both science and society.

13

#### 14 **1.1. Citizen science**

15 Citizen science (CS) is a process that involves the public in *doing* science (Bonney et al., 2009;  
16 Haklay et al., 2021a). The practice goes back to the National Audubon Society's annual Christmas  
17 bird count, which began in 1900 (Cohn, 2008), or even before if we consider the flowering records  
18 of the cherry trees in Japan, which dates back to 1401 (Primack and Higuchi, 2007). CS may help  
19 gather good quality scientific data (Hidalgo-Ruz and Thiel, 2013; van der Velde et al., 2017) and  
20 broaden researchers' spatial or temporal coverage, especially in terms of working in contexts with  
21 limited human access or financial resources (Bonney et al., 2009; Cohn, 2008). In addition, CS  
22 projects can improve the flow of information among scientists, the public, and decision-makers  
23 (McKinley et al., 2017). At the same time, they can have impacts on the individuals involved:  
24 increasing their understanding of scientific processes and the environment, making them feel  
25 recognised and appreciated for their contribution, and potentially making participants more sensitive  
26 to and aware of certain socio-environmental issues, developing a sense of agency that may encourage

1 further action (Brossard et al., 2005; Cunha et al., 2017; Dickinson et al., 2012; Eastman et al., 2014;  
2 Freitag and Pfeffer, 2013; Kruse et al., 2020a; Oturai et al., 2022; Theobald et al., 2015; Turrini et al.,  
3 2018). These multiple benefits make CS suitable for different scientific disciplines and societal issues,  
4 and its use has consequently been seen to increase in popularity (Freitag and Pfeffer, 2013).

5 Although CS approaches can be well designed and produce good-quality data, they can also  
6 face numerous challenges and critiques. Common issues facing CS initiatives are the credibility and  
7 validity of the data according to scientific standards (Kosmala et al., 2016), as well as the ethical  
8 issues related to the partnership between scientists and citizens (e.g., data availability, sharing,  
9 attribution, and confidentiality; feedback and acknowledgement to citizen scientists). Thus, nine key  
10 steps and ten principles for the development of comprehensive CS projects have been proposed  
11 (Bonney et al., 2009; Robinson et al., 2018). Both these steps and principles highlight aspects of CS  
12 that should be considered when designing, conducting, and reporting this scientific approach, from  
13 identifying appropriate research questions and recruiting, training, and evaluating citizen scientists to  
14 disseminating results, making data/results openly available or accessible (taking into account possible  
15 embargo periods and ethical issues), and acknowledging all contributors. A key emphasis for these  
16 steps and principles is to run CS projects that engage and benefit both science and citizen scientists.  
17 However, the extent to which we are formally reporting and critically analysing these aspects in our  
18 scientific publications may preclude advancing the science behind CS (Vohland et al., 2021). This is  
19 especially relevant given the peculiarities of CS in certain environmental issues, such as marine litter  
20 (GESAMP, 2019).

21

## 22 **1.2. Marine litter**

23 Marine and coastal anthropogenic litter (or debris) consist of solid waste produced by humans  
24 (UNEP, 2009), of which plastic is a major component (Napper and Thompson, 2020). It is a global  
25 and ever-increasing issue that causes great concern due to its negative impacts on the environment,  
26 economy, and society (Bergmann et al., 2017; Hammer et al., 2012; Newman et al., 2015; UNEP,

1 2016). For example, estimates suggest that every ton of marine plastic waste entering the world's  
2 ocean results in between US\$3,300 and \$33,000 costs to society, from direct impacts to sectors such  
3 as tourism and fishing (GESAMP, 2020), to indirect costs by harming the ecosystem services the  
4 ocean would usually provide (Beaumont et al., 2019).

5 A series of global, regional, national, and subnational policies have been created to address  
6 the marine litter problem (Karasik et al., 2020). Following the Honolulu Strategy (UNEP, 2011),  
7 several action plans to combat marine litter incorporated "conducting education and outreach on  
8 marine litter" (Karasik et al., 2020). Communication was emphasised as a relevant aspect to engage  
9 society to help tackle marine litter (SAPEA, 2019). In parallel, monitoring and assessing sources and  
10 hotspots of marine litter emerged as key aspects to guide policies and evaluate their effectiveness  
11 (GESAMP, 2019). In this context, CS can be considered a promising approach to merge both science  
12 and societal aspects related to marine litter.

13

### 14 **1.3. Marine litter and Citizen science: the need for a review**

15 In the context of the proposed Integrated Marine Debris Observing System (Maximenko et  
16 al., 2019), the Guidelines for Monitoring and Assessment of Marine Litter and Microplastics  
17 (GESAMP, 2019), and the emerging United Nations Environmental Assembly resolutions and  
18 regional and national action plans to combat marine litter (see Karasik et al., 2020), citizen scientists  
19 are acknowledged as vital players to widen our understanding of the occurrence and trends of marine  
20 litter. CS thus emerges as a combined approach to promote education and communication whilst  
21 simultaneously allowing the production of data for local-to-global monitoring of marine litter (UNEP,  
22 2021). Many CS initiatives related to marine litter exist worldwide, often striving to reach three key  
23 goals (1) to collect valuable scientific data to help understand this socio-environmental issue (e.g.  
24 Hidalgo-Ruz and Thiel, 2015), (2) to remove litter from the natural environment (e.g. Martin, 2013),  
25 and (3) to engage society in the scientific process and/or foster environmental awareness (e.g.  
26 Eastman et al., 2014; Merlino et al., 2015).

1           As the use and reporting of marine litter CS is on an upward trajectory, it is becoming more  
2 important to review and reflect on what is currently being done and reported, and more proactively,  
3 identify gaps that need to be addressed to help further advance this approach to benefit science and  
4 society. Here we will review the CS scientific literature in the context of marine litter to understand  
5 (1) general aspects of the studies (i.e. the objectives of the studies, the geographical location and  
6 coverage of the initiatives being reported, the accessibility of the data and results being produced; the  
7 acknowledgment of citizen scientists contribution); (2) what is being reported regarding marine litter  
8 data (e.g. if litter is recorded and/or removed, which environments are being studied and types and  
9 sizes of litter being reported); (3) what is being reported within the citizen dimension of these works  
10 (e.g. who the citizen scientists are, how they are recruited, trained and involved, and if impacts on  
11 these individuals are assessed), and (4) what are the challenges and opportunities to improve CS based  
12 on empirical evidence.

13

## 14 **2 Methodology**

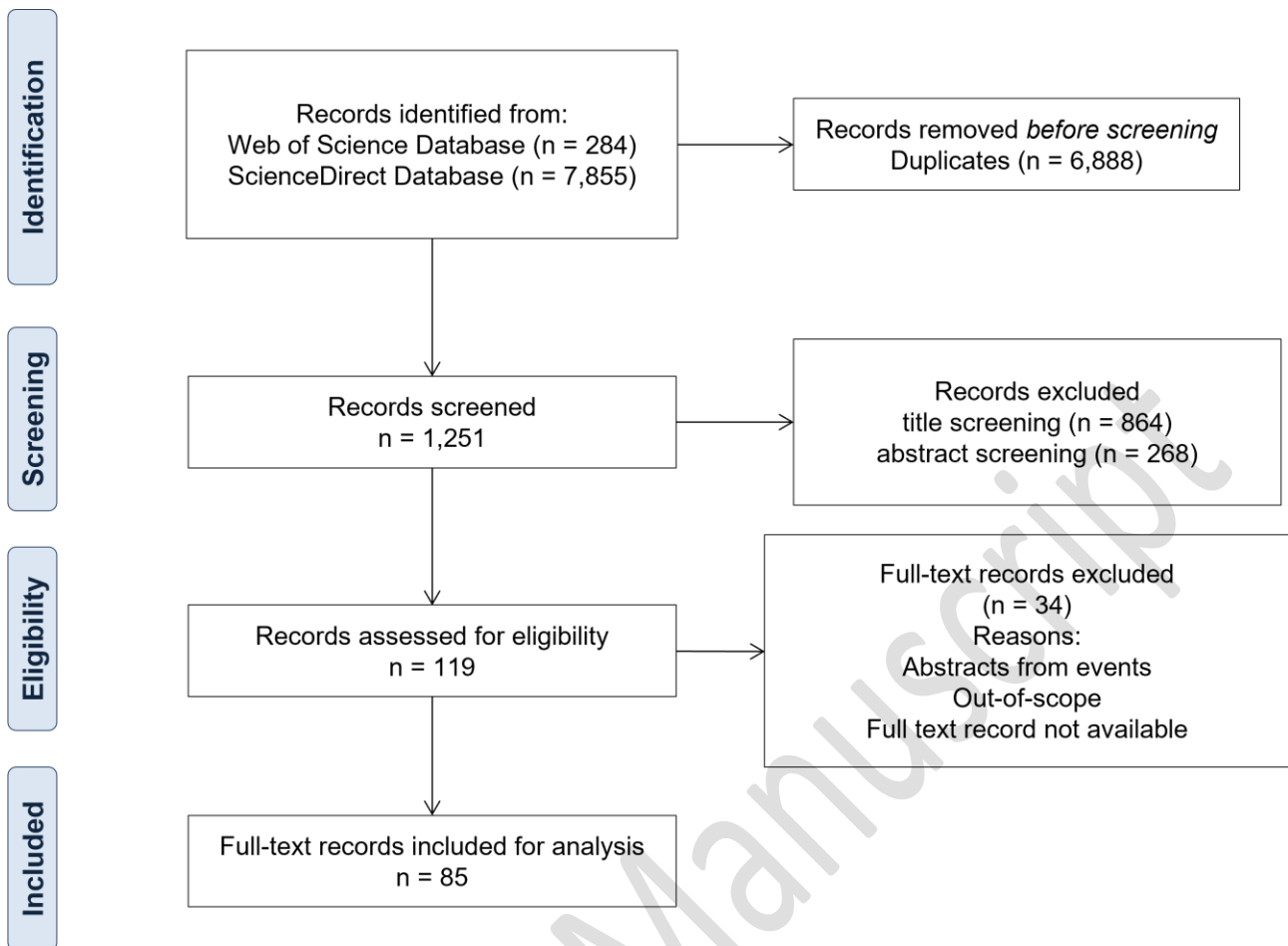
### 15 **2.1. Selecting of articles and book chapters**

16           For this review, we considered marine litter (ML) citizen science (CS) initiatives as a case  
17 study (Yin, 2005). The term “citizen science” was considered as the activities in which non-  
18 professional scientists are actively involved in one or more steps of the scientific research (Bonney et  
19 al., 2009; Dickinson et al., 2012; Theobald et al., 2015). The term “marine litter” was considered as  
20 “any persistent, manufactured or processed solid material discarded, disposed of or abandoned in the  
21 marine and coastal environment” (UNEP, 1995). Peer-reviewed articles and book chapters related to  
22 or describing citizen science initiatives focused on marine litter were surveyed on Web of Science  
23 and ScienceDirect platforms (until August, 04<sup>th</sup> 2021). This could be in the context of reporting  
24 empirical research (presenting results from or about a citizen science initiative), communication-  
25 based articles, or review articles. Abstracts from conference proceedings and grey literature (e.g.,  
26 non-peer-reviewed reports, thesis, and dissertations) were not considered for the present analysis. The

1 two platforms were searched using keywords for both “citizen science” and “marine litter”, including  
2 their synonyms (e.g., “collaborative monitoring” AND “marine debris”, see Supplementary Material  
3 - Table A for all keywords used).

4 Initially, we found 8,139 publication records using the search keywords. After removing  
5 duplicates, we screened the remaining 1,251 publication records by title, excluding 864 results that  
6 were unrelated to citizen science and marine litter (e.g., records related to chemical soil pollution,  
7 engineering, design etc.). Then, we read the abstracts of the remaining 387 publication records (Figure  
8 1). If no clear information related to a citizen science initiative or marine litter was found in the  
9 abstract, we searched for the keywords “volunteer”, “participant” and “citizen science” in the main  
10 text to seek any indication that a citizen science process was described, resulting in a further 268  
11 publication records being excluded. In the last stage, we read the remaining 119 publication records  
12 and selected those that explicitly (1) described citizen science initiative(s) (i.e., presenting the  
13 protocols, process etc.) and/or (2) presented the results of the citizen science initiative(s) (either the  
14 results regarding marine litter data or results evaluating aspects related to the citizens). Publication  
15 records describing studies in which the participation of citizens in the scientific process was not  
16 reported (e.g., not stating how citizens were involved), or in which the citizens were the subjects of  
17 the scientific inquiry (e.g., measuring citizens’ memories and opinions) were excluded. After this  
18 process, the final sample consisted of 85 publication records (including articles and book chapters,  
19 which will be referred to as *publication records* thereafter, see Figure 1).





**Figure 1.** Search flow of full-text articles and book chapters (publication records) included in the review (based on PRISMA flow - Moher et al., 2009).

Across these 85 publication records, 48 different citizen science initiatives were reported (thus some were reported multiple times). Since some of publication records described more than one CS initiative, each initiative described for each record was analysed independently and considered as a *search result*, resulting in 92 *search results* across these 85 publication records. For example, the publication record of Mioni et al. (2015) described two initiatives (Blue Paths and SeaCleaner), so each initiative was analysed as an independent search result. All percentage calculations performed in the present work were based on these 92 search results, except for the analysis regarding the articles and books chapters' objectives (see *section 2.2.1 Coding of general aspects*) and the analysis of citizen scientists' acknowledgement (see *section 2.2.3 Coding of the Citizen Dimension*), which were based on the 85 publication records selected (see Supplementary Table B - Ghilardi-Lopes et al., 2022 - with all search results and categorisations).

## 1 2.2. Coding schemes

2 Inspired by the existing recommendations and principles that guide citizen science practice and  
3 research (Robinson et al., 2018), we examined thirteen aspects in each search result: four related to  
4 general characteristics of the studies, four related to marine litter data, and five related to the citizen  
5 scientists (see a detailed description below). For each aspect, we coded the results into categories,  
6 which were either based on categories already in existence in the literature (using a top-down  
7 approach) or that emerged from the reading of the search results (a bottom-up approach identifying  
8 recurring themes; Bardin, 2016). These simplified categories were then summarised into frequencies  
9 of occurrence.

10 All authors read the same five publication records (representing a sample of 5.9% of the  
11 records) to discuss and review the categories and codes until there was consistency in code  
12 assignment. All the names of the categories and their definitions were defined *a priori* and the authors  
13 fulfilled, independently, a table coding those categories for the publication records of the sample.  
14 After this step, the authors shared their results and discussed the inconsistencies obtained in code  
15 assignment so that a consensus was reached and a fully shared understanding of how to categorise  
16 the search results was reached. If a new category not previously considered was identified during the  
17 reading of the full publication records, the authors discussed how to include it (see Supplementary  
18 Tables C-I for the final list of categories and their respective definitions) and a revision of all other  
19 publication records already coded was performed to look for the possible presence of this new  
20 category. As the focus of this analysis is how citizen science initiatives were being reported within  
21 the peer-reviewed scientific literature, we did not consider our previous knowledge about the  
22 initiatives and only considered information explicitly reported within or that could be obtained from  
23 the publication records.

24

25

26

### 1 2.2.1. Coding of general aspects

2 (01) *Articles and book chapters' objectives* - To understand the overall focus of the 85  
3 publication records, their objectives were summarised, retrieved from the abstract and  
4 introduction/objective section. The articles and book chapters' objectives (rather than the initiatives'  
5 general objectives) were summarised into 11 categories. They could have more than one objective,  
6 from reporting novel insights on marine litter (e.g., its composition or distribution) to assessing  
7 impacts on the citizen scientists and/or presenting new protocols, thus the sum of the objectives'  
8 frequencies could be higher than 100%. For the full list of categories and their respective definitions,  
9 see Supplementary Material - Table C.

10 (02) *Geographical scale* - To understand the geographical context of the initiatives being  
11 reported in each of the 92 search results, we examined both the geographical scale and socio-political  
12 regions used in these initiatives, retrieved mainly from the methodology section. In terms of  
13 geographical scale, we framed the search results into one of six categories based on the  
14 Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services framework and  
15 Hothi (2005): Local, Subnational, National, Regional, Interregional or Global (see Supplementary  
16 Materials - Table D for the full definitions). The socio-political regions considered were: Latin  
17 America and the Caribbean, North America, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Oceania.

18 (03) *Access to data and results* - One important CS principle is allowing access to data and  
19 results, including to citizen scientists themselves (Robinson et al., 2018). Thus, the availability of  
20 data and results as explicitly noted within the 92 search results was summarised into five categories:  
21 a) if raw data were openly available, b) if results were openly available, c) if both data and results  
22 were openly available, d) if neither data nor results were openly available, and e) not stated/unknown  
23 (see Supplementary Materials - Table E for all categories and definitions). We only considered  
24 data/results as openly available if the search result was published in an open-access format or if the  
25 search result stated a website or database where data and/or results were made available.

1           (04) *Citizen scientists' acknowledgement* - To understand if the publications derived from CS  
2 initiatives that acknowledged the contribution of the citizen scientists, as recommended in guidelines  
3 for good practices in CS (Robinson et al., 2018), we searched whether the citizen scientists were  
4 explicitly thanked (individually, by the citation of their names; or as a group, being acknowledged  
5 only as “citizen scientists” or “volunteer contributors”) in the acknowledgement section of the 85  
6 publication records or not. We also searched for the words “thank” and “acknowledge” in the whole  
7 manuscripts to see if there was any kind of acknowledgement in other sections.

8

### 9 **2.2.2. Coding of aspects related to marine litter data**

10           (05) *Removal/record of marine litter* - As noted above, marine litter citizen science initiatives  
11 can focus on cleaning an environment locally *and/or* collecting data. We distinguished between  
12 search results (n = 92) that reported marine litter and also removed it and those that just recorded  
13 (without removal), based on the information available in the abstract and methodology section of the  
14 85 publication records.

15           (06) *Sampled environment* - To understand if a certain environment is receiving more attention  
16 and, in turn, identify environmental locations in need of greater scientific attention, we categorised  
17 the sampled environment as either: shoreline (litter collected on the interface between land and sea –  
18 when the information was available we specified if the environment was a beach, a reef or a rocky  
19 shore), floating (litter collected in the water column and water surface), seafloor (litter collected  
20 underwater and on the bottom, including over the biota) or biota (litter entangled on or ingested by  
21 organisms); all categories according to GESAMP (2019). This information was obtained mostly from  
22 the methodology section of the 85 publication records and was identified for each 92 search results.  
23 Some search results reported multiple sampled environments; thus, the sum of all frequencies can be  
24 higher than 100%.

25           (07) *Size of marine litter* - To understand the profile of the marine litter being reported in the  
26 literature, we standardised and summarised the size of the litter. The scales of marine litter size were

1 not the same across the 92 search results, therefore, to compare them, we converted these different  
2 scales to the scale used in the GESAMP reports (2019, 2016): micro (<5 mm), meso (5 mm-2.5 cm),  
3 macro (2.5 cm-1 m), mega (>1m) or mixed (more than one of the categories). If the search result did  
4 not explicitly mention the size of the litter, but the category could be deduced from the description or  
5 images provided in the search result, the most appropriate category was selected. When examining  
6 the search results, we coded size based on both their sampling focus (what size(s) did the protocols  
7 concentrate on) typically derived from the methods sections, as well as noting if they explicitly  
8 examined the size of the litter as part of their scientific enquiry, reported within their results sections.

9 (08) *Type of marine litter* - Another important aspect to know is what types of litter are being  
10 reported within the literature. For this, we concentrated on the results sections of the 85 publication  
11 records and examined the findings of the 92 search results. There was a lot of variation on how this  
12 was being reported. First, there was a variation on how the items were described, for example by  
13 material or by item-type. Consequently, we summarised these categories into 9 material-type  
14 categories (e.g. plastic, glass, metal etc.) and 6 item-level categories (e.g. fishing materials, sanitary  
15 products, and cigarette materials - see Supplementary Material - Table F for all categories and  
16 definitions), based on Cheschire et al. (2009). Second, the number of types reported also varied, with  
17 some search results focusing on one specific type of litter (such as plastic resin pellets) whereas others  
18 examined a range of types. Consequently, the frequency of our summary categories exceeded 100%.

19

### 20 **2.2.3. Coding of aspects related to the citizen scientists**

21 (09) *Profile of the citizen scientists* - To summarise the types of populations that participated  
22 as citizen scientists, the 92 search results were first coded on whether this detail was reported  
23 (“present” or “absent/not reported”). Those that explicitly described the citizen scientists’ profile were  
24 then summarised into five groups (school groups, university groups, general public, mixed groups or  
25 other; see Supplementary Materials - Table G for all categories and definitions). The categories  
26 emerged mainly from the reading of the content of the methodology and results section of the 85

1 publication records and was coded for each of the 92 search results. As some search results reported  
2 multiple populations, the sum of all frequencies could be higher than 100%.

3 (10) *Recruitment* - Considering that recruitment strategies can be determinant for the success  
4 of a citizen science initiative (Brouwer and Hessels, 2019), we summarised how the 92 search results  
5 had this aspect reported. Similarly, to the profile of the citizen scientists, the recruitment strategies  
6 were first coded as “present” or “absent/not reported”. For those that explicitly described the  
7 recruitment strategies, 14 different categories emerged from the reading of the search results’ content,  
8 mainly from the methodology section of the 85 publication records and was coded for each of the 92  
9 search results. These recruitment strategies included face-to-face events, personal contacts (via an  
10 institution or via the project staff), courses, or dissemination in the media (social networks, television,  
11 radio, newspapers; see Supplementary Materials – Table H for all categories and definitions). If a  
12 search result reported more than one strategy, they were all considered in the analysis, thus exceeding  
13 100%.

14 (11) *Citizen scientists’ involvement/tasks* – To examine how the level of engagement was  
15 reported in the 92 search results, citizen scientists’ involvement was coded in two ways. First, the  
16 involvement of the citizen scientists was categorised based on definitions by Wiggins & Crowston  
17 (2011): (a) *co-created* – citizen scientists participate in all stages of scientific inquiry, from defining  
18 a question to discussing results; (b) *collaborative* – citizen scientists participate mainly in data  
19 collection, sample and/or data analysis; sometimes they design the study, interpret data, draw  
20 conclusions and disseminate results; (c) *contributory* – citizen scientists mainly contribute with data;  
21 secondarily they can analyse data and disseminate results. Second, each task in which the citizen  
22 scientists participated, from defining a question to disseminating the results, was categorised based  
23 on Bonney et al. (2009) (see Supplementary Materials – Table I for all categories and definitions). If  
24 there was no mention in the search result regarding the involvement of the citizen scientists, we stated  
25 it as “not stated/unknown”. This information was retrieved mainly from the methodology and results  
26 section of the 85 publication records and was coded for each of the 92 search results.

1           (12) *Citizen scientists' training* - As emphasised as a key step for CS by Bonney et al. (2009),  
2 we also summarised the training the citizen scientists reportedly undertook. It was categorised as “not  
3 stated/unknown”, “formal” or “informal”. When this aspect was explicitly reported in the search  
4 result, we categorised it as *formal training* when citizen scientists received mandatory training before  
5 the participation, receiving instructions via face-to-face training such as classroom courses or  
6 practical learning, demonstrations and/or support in the field. In contrast, *informal training*  
7 represented initiatives in which the citizen scientists received non-mandatory training, receiving  
8 instructions via guides, protocols, or other materials only. This information was retrieved mainly from  
9 the methodology and results section of the 85 publication records and was coded for each of the 92  
10 search results.

11           (13) *Citizen scientists' assessment* - As a recommended step (Bonney et al., 2009) and a  
12 requirement that the activity should be beneficial to the individuals involved (Robinson et al., 2018),  
13 we examined the methodology and results sections of the 85 publication records to see whether any  
14 assessment of the impacts on the citizen scientists (learning or enjoyment/engagement outcomes) was  
15 reported for each search result. We categorised it as “explicit” when it was reported with evidence,  
16 reporting the methods used (e.g. application of assessment instruments as questionnaires and/or  
17 interviews followed by qualitative or quantitative analysis), or as “implicit” when the articles made  
18 some inference to the citizen scientists' experiences (e.g. enjoyed it, would do again) but without any  
19 evidence or reference to a data collection method (e.g. based on the description of coordinators  
20 impressions, citation of only some citizen scientists' impressions, or the indirect evaluation through  
21 the observation of citizen scientists engagement in the activities). Results that did not make any  
22 reference to an assessment were marked as “not stated/unknown”. For those search results that  
23 reported on the assessment of citizen scientists with evidence, we also quantified the frequency of the  
24 main outcomes that were reported, using categories that emerged from the reading of their content.

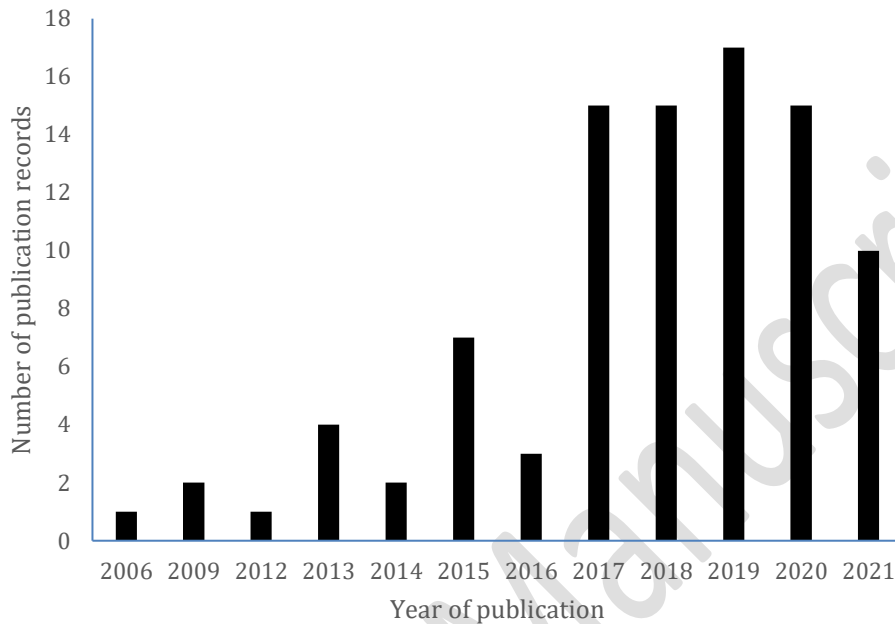
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26

## 1 3 Results

### 2 3.1. General aspects

3 The publication records found ( $n = 85$ ) were published between 2006 and August, 2021,  
4 showing a clear increase in number from 2017 on (Figure 2).

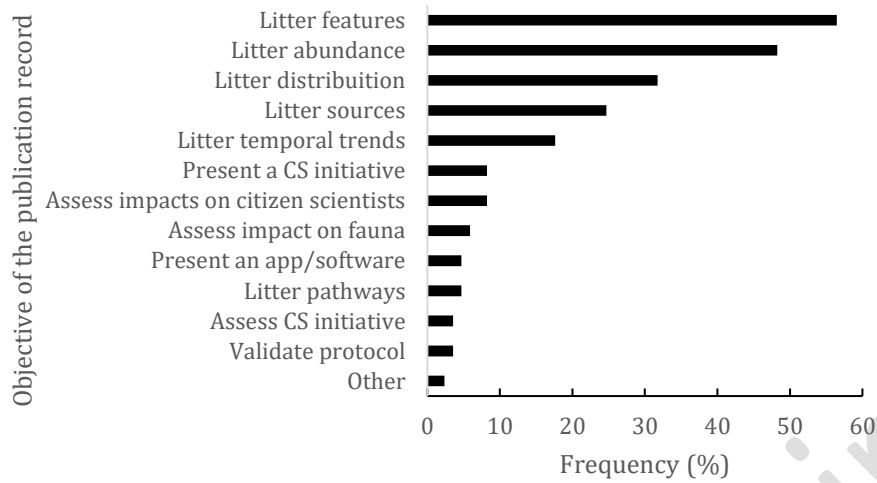


5  
6 **Figure 2.** Number of publication records found per year of publication ( $n = 85$ ).

#### 8 3.1.1. Articles and book chapters' objectives

9 The majority of the publication records ( $n = 85$ ) aimed to report the assessment of one or more  
10 litter indicators, such as their features (e.g., type of material, chemical composition, size, shape, and/or  
11 other physicochemical features – 56.5%), abundance (48.2%), distribution (31.8%), and sources  
12 (24.7%). Only a few of them aimed at reporting on the assessment of the impacts of the CS initiatives  
13 on the citizen scientists (engagement; attitudes and behaviours; awareness – 8.2%), on the validation  
14 of protocols (3.5%) or on the assessment of the CS initiatives themselves (3.5%) (Figure 3). The  
15 majority of the publication records presented a clear focus either on the quantification of litter or on  
16 the assessment of citizen scientists, and only two publication records (Kiessling et al., 2017; Yeo et  
17 al., 2015) aimed to quantify the litter and also to assess citizen scientists. The assessment of the CS  
18 initiatives was the unique objective on those publication records that presented it.





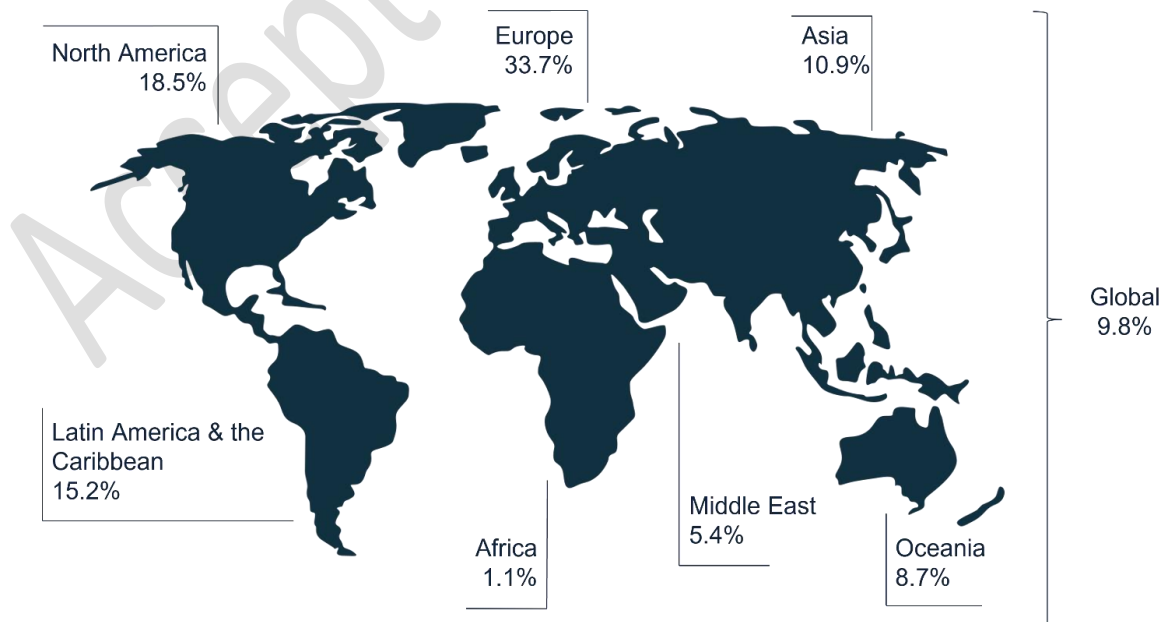
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2 **Figure 3.** Frequencies (%) of the objectives stated in the analysed publication records (n = 85). Note:  
 3 See details in section 2.2.1 *Coding of general aspects*; studies could have multiple objectives (all  
 4 publication records had at least one clearly identifiable objective and up to a maximum of six  
 5 objectives).

6

### 7 3.1.2. Geographical scale

8 The search results reported mainly subnational (28.3%) and local (26.1%) CS initiatives, most  
 9 of them undertaken in developed regions, especially Europe and North America, with an under-  
 10 representation of studies in Africa and the Middle East (Figure 4).



11

12 **Figure 4.** Socio-political region where the search results were undertaken (n = 92). The search results  
 13 could encompass more than one region, so that the sum is higher than 100%.

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### **3.1.3. Access to data and results**

Many search results did not make any reference to the accessibility of the data or results and conclusions for citizen scientists and/or the general public (43.5%). The results and conclusions (31.5%) or the data (12.0%) of some search results were openly available, but only 9.8% of them provided both data and findings to the public. Some search results (3.3%) stated that data was available by requesting the project coordinators.

### **3.1.4. Citizen scientists' acknowledgement**

Most (73.9%) publication records acknowledged the citizen scientists, but 23.7% did not have an explicit thank-you note to the citizen scientists for their contributions to the research. In 2.4%, acknowledgement to citizen scientists was not applicable: one search result was a paper that presented a software (Schattschneider et al., 2020) and the other reported the results of interviews with CS project's coordinators (Rambonnet et al., 2019).

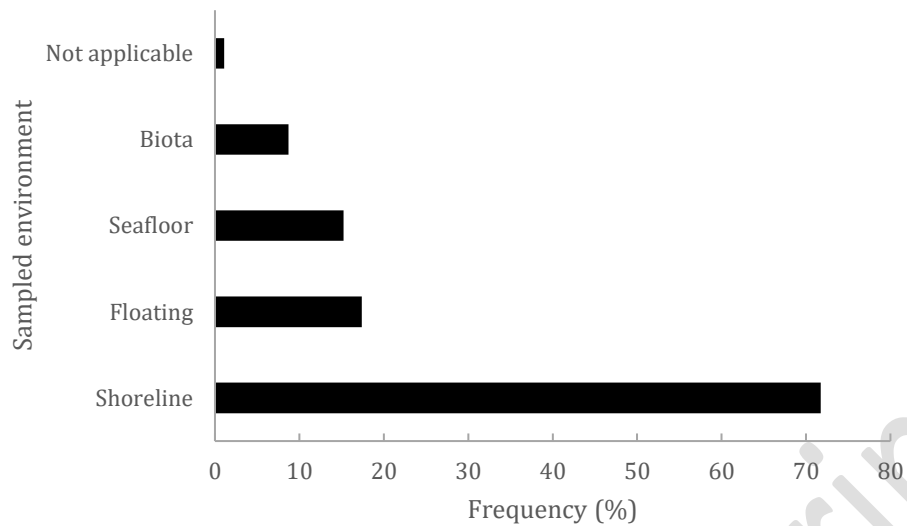
## **3.2. Aspects related to marine litter data**

### **3.2.1. Removal/record of marine litter**

The recording of litter was a major aspect reported by most of the search results (92.4%). The removal of the litter from the environment was also reported in most of them (77.2%), but in 15.2% of the search results, there was no reference to what happened to the litter after the scientific study concluded. In 7.6% of the search results, litter was not removed from the environment because they were online initiatives.

### **3.2.2. Sampled environment**

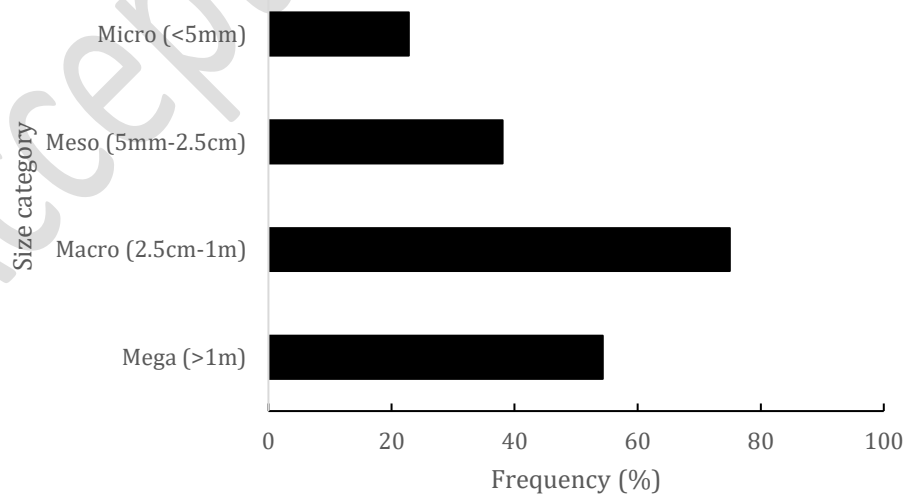
Most search results reported on litter collected on shorelines (71.7% - Figure 5), mainly on sandy beaches (68.5% - see Supplementary Table B - Ghilardi-Lopes et al., 2022).



1  
2 **Figure 5.** Sampled environment reported in the search results (n = 92). The search results could  
3 encompass more than one environmental category, so that the sum of all categories is higher than  
4 100%.

### 5 6 **3.2.3. Size of marine litter**

7 Macro (0.25m-1m) and mega-litter (> 1m) were reported more frequently as the focus of the  
8 CS protocols presented in the search results (Figure 6). When it came to the scientific enquiry of the  
9 search results, 18.5% presented some kind of analysis (e.g., quantification, comparisons) related to  
10 the sizes of the litter found by citizen scientists (see supplementary Table B - Ghilardi-Lopes et al.,  
11 2022).



12  
13 **Figure 6.** Size categories reported in the search results (n = 92) as being the target of the CS protocols.  
14 The protocols could encompass more than one size category, so that the sum of all categories is higher  
15 than 100%.

16

### 1 **3.2.4. Type of marine litter**

2 Most search results (79.3%) explicitly reported the types of marine litter in their findings, but  
3 there was a lot of variation on how this was being reported. For instance, they varied in how the items  
4 were described: most search results used material-level categories, such as glass, paper or plastic, but  
5 some used very specific item-type categories, such as derelict crab traps or high-density polyethylene.

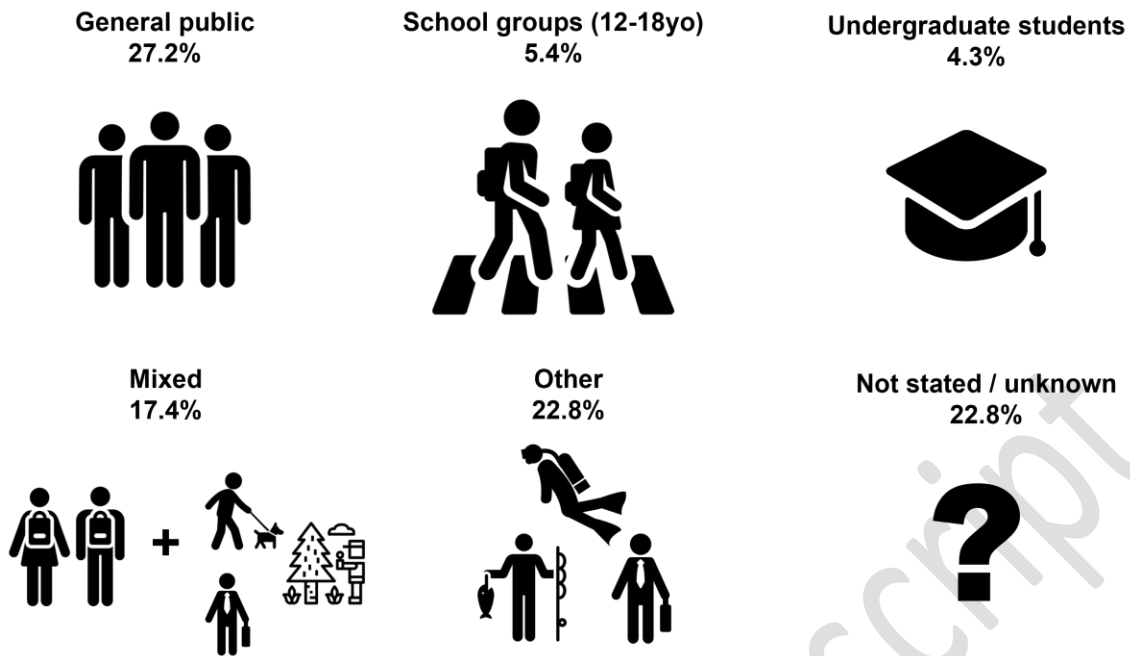
6 When it came to the materials, fragments and items made of plastic were reported by the  
7 majority of the search results (78.3%), along with fragments, and items made of metal (43.5%) and  
8 glass (41.3%). To a lesser extent, paper and cardboard (30.4%), natural or processed wood (29.3%),  
9 rubber (21.7%), ceramic waste (8.7%) and organic waste (7.6%) were noted. When it came to coding  
10 based on item-type, fishing items were commonly reported (e.g., nets, lines, lures, and buoys –  
11 45.7%), along with cigarette materials (29.3%), clothing and textile (such as fabrics, clothes, and  
12 shoes – 27.2%), sanitary waste (such as tampons, sanitary pads, and diapers - in 16.3%) and medical  
13 waste (5.4%).

14

## 15 **3.3. Aspects related to the citizen scientists**

### 16 **3.3.1. Citizen scientists' profile**

17 Most search results (77.2%) specified the citizen scientists' profile (Figure 7). School children  
18 (5.4%) and undergraduate students (4.3%) were often included in the initiatives, and it was also  
19 common to find citizen scientists with different profiles participating in the same initiative. The most  
20 frequent profiles reported were the general public (27.2%) and mixed groups (17.4%, e.g., dog and  
21 beach walkers, natural resource management professionals, members of recreational clubs, and  
22 corporate participants).



1

2 **Figure 7.** Profiles of the citizen scientists participating in marine litter citizen science initiatives  
 3 reported in the search results (n=92). The category “other” included workers or members from a  
 4 specific group, company or institution, fishers, SCUBA divers and snorkelers, specific local  
 5 communities, and Facebook users. Icons designed by Freepik and Nikita Golubev from Flaticon.

6

7

### 8 3.3.2. Citizen scientists’ recruitment

9 Just over half of the 92 search results mentioned the ways citizen scientists were recruited  
 10 (53.3%). The most common was via organisations or social associations (15.2%) that were partners  
 11 or coordinated the initiatives, followed by schools or universities (13.0%), in which the initiative was  
 12 mostly mandatory and part of the teaching program. Online recruitment via social media, email,  
 13 websites, and apps (12.0%), personal contact (7.6%) and recruitment via press coverage (TV, radio,  
 14 newspapers, and journals – 6.5%) were also used. It is noteworthy that a large sample of search results  
 15 (46.8%) did not mention how citizen scientists were recruited.

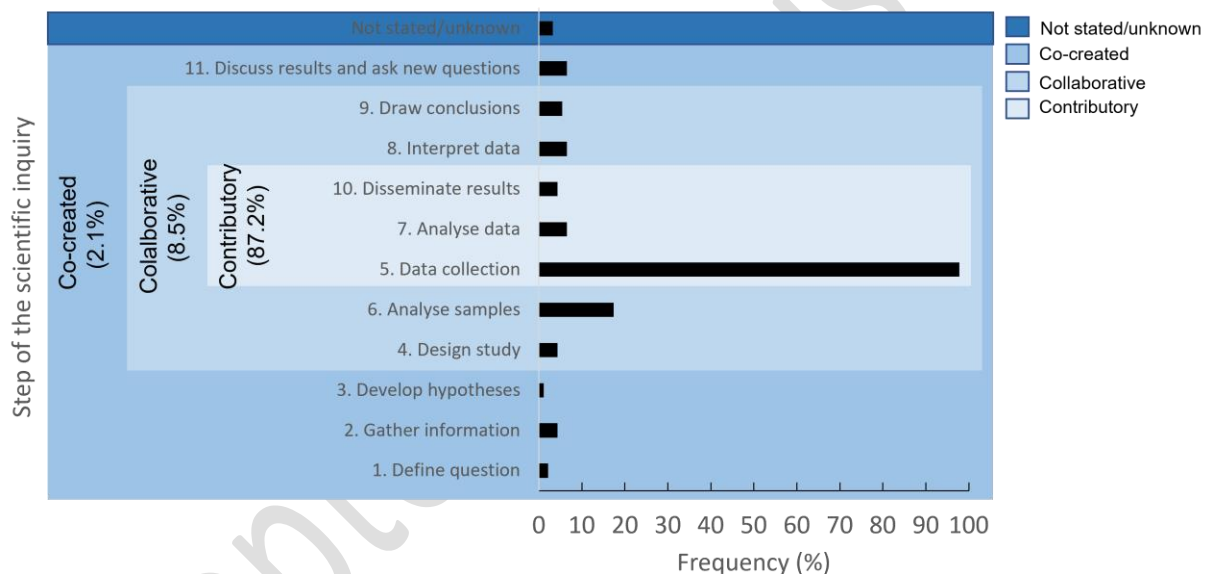
16

### 17 3.3.3. Citizen scientists’ involvement/tasks

18 The involvement of citizen scientists in the initiatives reported was mostly contributory  
 19 (87.2%), in which citizen scientists contributed to data collection, and secondarily they could analyse

1 data and disseminate results. Collaborative (8.5%) and co-created (2.3%) processes, in which citizen  
 2 scientists not only collect data but participate in other steps of the scientific method too, were not well  
 3 represented.

4 Almost all search results (97.8%) that specified citizen scientists' involvement included data  
 5 collection as part of their activities and in 80% of the search results, data collection was the only step  
 6 of the scientific inquiry in which citizen scientists were involved. Also, when involved in multiple  
 7 steps, the contribution of citizen scientists, as declared in the search results, was concentrated in  
 8 collecting and analysing samples (Figure 8).



10

11 **Figure 8.** Steps of the scientific inquiry in which citizen scientists were involved in marine litter  
 12 citizen science initiatives reported in the search results (n = 92). Steps 1 to 11 are included in the “Co-  
 13 created” category; steps 4 to 10 are included in the “Collaborative” category; and steps 5, 7 and 10  
 14 are included in the “Contributory” category.

15

### 16 3.3.4. Citizen scientists' training

17 About two thirds of the search results (65.2%) mentioned that the reported initiatives provided  
 18 some kind of training to citizen scientists. The training was reported as mandatory prior to citizen  
 19 scientists' participation in less than half of search results (*formal training* – 42.4%). This included  
 20 face-to-face training, such as classroom courses or practical learning, demonstrations, and/or support

1 in the field to citizen scientists. Some of those search results that mentioned formal training did not  
2 specify exactly how it was conducted (23.3%). *Informal training* for the citizen scientists was  
3 explicitly mentioned in 22.8% of the search results. In this category, the citizen scientists were mostly  
4 asked to read protocols, guidelines, or similar materials, or had the possibility to contact the  
5 initiative's coordinator via online communications, chat, or email. In 6.5% of the search results, it  
6 was explicitly stated that no training was provided, and in 28.3% of the search results there was no  
7 mention regarding the training of citizen scientists.

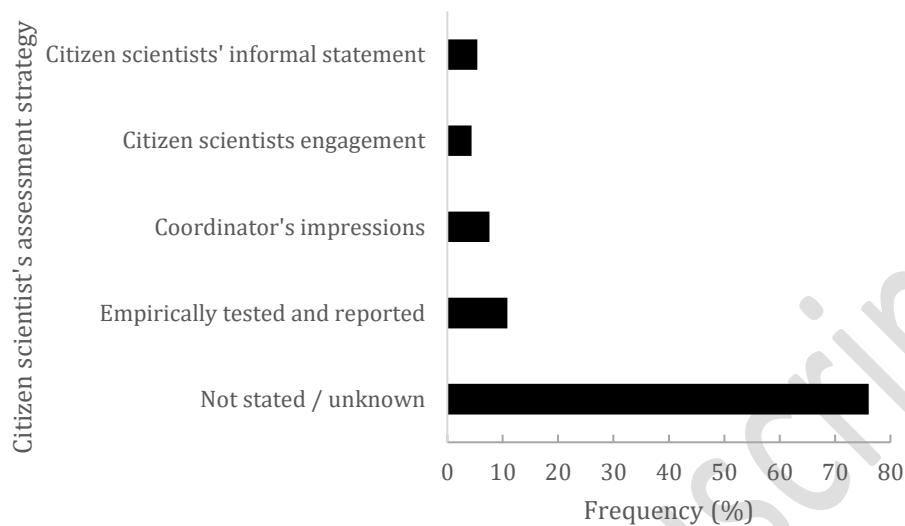
8

### 9 **3.3.5. Citizen scientists' assessment**

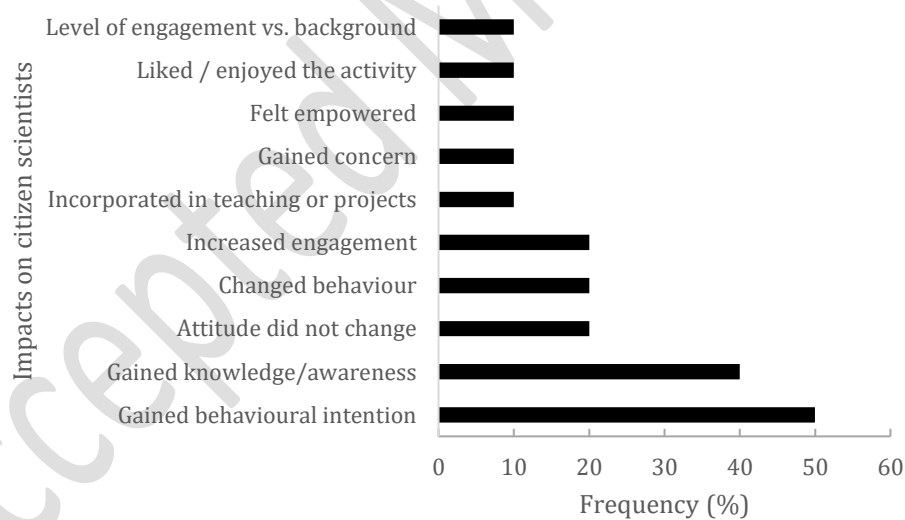
10 The majority of the search results did not report any evaluation or assessment of impacts on  
11 the citizen scientists (78.3%). In 10.9%, the citizen scientists' experience was reported without  
12 evidence and in 10.9% it was reported with some form of evidence (Figure 9). In those that briefly  
13 noted the citizen scientists' experience without evidence, some of them considered the project  
14 coordinators' or researchers' impressions (7.3%). For example, they stated citizen scientists generally  
15 participated with enthusiasm in the initiative or that the participation in the initiative influenced  
16 citizen scientists' behaviour/engagement (e.g. some citizen scientists started discussing how the  
17 marine litter problem could be mitigated and initiated corporate changes to reduce the environmental  
18 footprint, and some search results simply stated the citizen scientists' behaviour changed, without  
19 additional information) or inferring the citizen scientists enjoyed the project because they remained  
20 on it for further activities or the research team was invited to continue the study (4.2%). Also, some  
21 search results stated that some citizen scientists spontaneously reported their positive impressions  
22 about the initiative (5.2%), as reporting a sense of achievement, ownership, and empowerment, and  
23 a desire to change behaviour and educate others.

24 If we consider only those search results ( $n = 10$ ) that assessed the citizen scientists with  
25 evidence (e.g., using questionnaires, measures, or indexes), their main findings were that the

1 participants presented an increase in behavioural intention (50.0%) and in knowledge or awareness  
 2 (40.0%) (Figure 10).



3  
 4 **Figure 9.** Frequency (%) of assessment strategies of citizen scientists' experience reported in the  
 5 search results (n = 92). Search results could report more than one strategy, so that the sum of all  
 6 categories is higher than 100%.  
 7



8  
 9 **Figure 10.** Search results' main findings (%) from citizen scientists' assessment with evidence (n =  
 10 10 search results that presented the assessment as an objective).  
 11

## 12 4 Discussion

13 To our knowledge, our analysis provides the first overview of how citizen science initiatives  
 14 are being reported in the scientific literature within the context of marine litter. Specifically, we  
 15 examined important aspects related to CS practice and research that might further advance the field.



1 The 85 publication records published between 2006 and August 2021 showed an increase in the  
2 number per year after 2017, corroborating the tendency observed in previous studies that showed CS  
3 studies significantly increased after the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Kullenberg and Kasperowski,  
4 2016). Whilst the uptake and reporting of CS has grown in popularity, our analysis also identified  
5 gaps in this field and thus opportunities for future work.

6

#### 7 **4.1. General aspects**

8 Our literature review returned 92 search results (reporting on 48 different initiatives across 85  
9 publication records), and our in-depth analysis of these showed that most of the studies aimed at  
10 reporting aspects related to marine litter (e.g., composition, abundance, distribution, trends and  
11 sources of litter) and few of them aimed at reporting on the assessment of the impacts of CS initiatives  
12 on the citizen scientists (e.g., research related to engagement; motivations; attitudes and behaviours;  
13 awareness or perceptions), evidencing a gap to be filled. In one of the articles that assessed the  
14 impacts of a CS initiative on the citizen scientists, the authors state “We think that the assessment of  
15 the societal/educational aspect of citizen science requires the same scientific attention that is devoted  
16 to the evaluation of the data collected for research purposes” (Locritani et al., 2019, p. 325) and our  
17 findings and earlier work (Bonney et al., 2009; Phillips et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2018) agree with  
18 this point of view. The lack of formal analysis of the aspects related to citizen scientists may preclude  
19 improvements in its practice and be a consequence of the lack of formal reporting in the scientific  
20 literature, as we will discuss below.

21 Our results demonstrated that most search results reported on local and subnational initiatives,  
22 a similar pattern reported by Hidalgo-Ruz and Thiel (2015). Moreover, most search results were  
23 based in developed countries, with very few taking place in developing countries and only one in  
24 Africa. This contrasts with one of the main roles of CS in terms of widening the capacity to acquire  
25 data to feed monitoring and assessment schemes (GESAMP, 2019; Maximenko et al., 2019; Requier  
26 et al., 2020). This is a gap that needs further attention to expand CS influence in both research and

1 management. Incentives for citizen science initiatives based in the Global South (in terms of human  
2 and financial resources), as well as incentives to publish the results from these initiatives (e.g., calls  
3 for thematic issues in journals and granting discounts/waives on publication fees for authors from  
4 these localities) can help in this regard.

5 In addition, over a quarter of our search results did not acknowledge the citizen scientists'  
6 contribution. Whilst this may have been translated via other mediums (e.g., direct contact with the  
7 citizen scientists or project websites), arguably this should be equally transparent in the reporting of  
8 these initiatives in the scientific literature. Expressing appreciation to participants and sharing with  
9 them the impact and results of their contributions in new scientific insights, policies or management  
10 decisions improve the likelihood of citizen scientists to continue engaging in the initiative and even  
11 contributing to disseminate results to different stakeholders (Rambonnet et al., 2019; Resnik et al.,  
12 2015; Strauss and Rager, 2017; Zettler et al., 2017).

13 Finally, more than a third of our search results did not make any reference to the accessibility  
14 of the data or results. This is an issue that should be considered in the scientific literature related to  
15 CS. Citizen science is a key component of open science (EU, 2022, 2019; UNESCO, 2021), playing  
16 an important role in the endeavour of democratizing knowledge. However, there can be some barriers  
17 for taking full advantage of this feature of citizen science, such as the lack of organized and  
18 interoperable open databases and the already mentioned high fees charged by many journals for open  
19 access publications.

## 21 **4.2. Aspects related to marine litter data**

22 As noted before, the vast majority of search results fully reported specific aspects related to  
23 marine litter. The present review did not intend to evaluate the quality of the data produced by  
24 citizens, i.e., the quality of the science derived from data, or the decisions based on them, but  
25 specifically, the results here reveal what the literature was explicitly reporting on. The surveyed  
26 studies in general reported on litter features or abundance. The composition of litter evidenced by

1 CS initiatives is seen as vital, for example, to evaluate the effectiveness of policies directed to specific  
2 items such as plastic bags and straws (GESAMP, 2019). While high density items (e.g., glass or  
3 metal) may suggest local sources or beach littering, predominance of plastic fragments (reported in  
4 78.3% of our search results) may indicate an oceanic origin of items that are being degraded (and  
5 fragmented) for a long time (Honorato-Zimmer et al., 2019; Krelling and Turra, 2019).  
6 Characterization of litter features by CS initiatives may also inform sources and pathways, although  
7 the latter was rarely reported in the survey results.

8 When the size of the litter targeted was reported, it revealed a strong skewness to large-sized  
9 items (>2.5 cm) and an under-representation of meso and microlitter. Moreover, the results showed  
10 an emphasis on the shoreline sampling, mainly beaches (68.5%) and an under-representation of  
11 studies targeting floating or seafloor litter or the interactions between litter and the biota. The study  
12 of Melvin et al. (2021) also indicated gaps regarding the types of environments being studied for  
13 plastic pollution, such as coarse sediment and snow or ice. The interest of citizen scientists, as well  
14 as safety concerns or the amount of labour involved in field and sample processing activities, may  
15 explain such under-representations in sizes and sampled environments whilst simultaneously  
16 highlighting contexts that CS initiatives could broaden into in the future. One important aspect to be  
17 considered when planning a citizen science initiative is the level of professionalism and training  
18 (Haklay et al., 2021b) needed to participate. Protocols that present no assumption about expertise or  
19 do not need significant training are better suited for citizen scientists to perform, as is the case of  
20 those protocols targeted at macrolitter or mesolitter items on easily accessed sandy beaches.

21 The relevance of all information regarding litter is enhanced when data can be compared  
22 among locations or dates, helping in the identification of hotspots or trends of litter accumulation to  
23 address, for example, differential risks to societal policy concerns or effectiveness of public policies  
24 (GESAMP, 2020, 2019). This kind of application is strongly dependent on the reliability and  
25 comparability of the data acquired from citizen science approaches (Hidalgo-Ruz and Thiel, 2015;  
26 Rambonnet et al., 2019). As stated in the ten principles of citizen science (Robinson et al., 2018),

1 citizen science initiatives produce genuine scientific data (principle 2) and have limitations and  
2 biases that should be considered and controlled for (principle 6). Generally, the validity of citizen  
3 science produced data is verified through pilot testing of protocols or comparisons between the  
4 results obtained by citizen scientists and specialists. Our results showed that only 3.5% of the  
5 publication records aimed at validating protocols or the data produced by citizen scientists. This does  
6 not mean that the protocols currently being used are not scientifically validated, but it is advisable  
7 that the studies that report on the results of the application of CS protocols explicitly inform the  
8 readers about the reliability of the data being reported (see, for example, the data verification  
9 flowchart presented in the work of Kiessling et al., 2019). This is important because the more reliable  
10 the data, the more accurate would be the comparisons of litter abundance across different spatial and  
11 temporal scales. The comparability of data can be achieved through the use of standardised (or  
12 harmonized) protocols, as well as the standardisation of measurement scales (Ambrose, 2021; Balázs  
13 et al., 2021; Barcelo and Pico, 2020; Freitag et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2011; Wiggins et al., 2011).  
14 As demonstrated in our findings, measures (such as size classifications) were highly variable  
15 amongst the search results and can prevent, for example, the production of synthesis and meta-  
16 analysis which would give us a broad and integrated view of the issue (Ottinger, 2010; Zettler et al.,  
17 2017), thus further highlighting an opportunity for future development. Comparison among different  
18 localities can also be achieved by large-scale studies if adopting a more standardised approach.

19

### 20 **4.3. Aspects related to the citizen scientists**

21 Whilst our findings support previously noted research gaps as well as highlight new  
22 challenges related to marine litter aspects, they also highlight a gap in the scientific reporting of some  
23 basic aspects related to the citizen scientists. For CS research to truly advance, the scientific aspects  
24 of the environmental issue should not be considered independent from those related to the citizen  
25 scientists, as they both rely on each other. For example, the sampling scale will depend on recruitment  
26 strategies and who is engaged, and the quality and type of the data recorded will be reliant on the

1 training of the citizen scientists. Thus, it is necessary to understand if and how those aspects are  
2 currently being reported within the literature, which in turn will aid comparisons and replication to  
3 support further improvements in citizen science initiatives with marine litter.

4         Although most of our search results mentioned the profile of citizen scientists, there was little  
5 information in this regard, with almost one-third of them describing their participants only as “general  
6 public”. Similarly, almost half of the search results did not mention how they recruited citizen  
7 scientists. This vague information may prevent the identification of the target audience, their interests,  
8 background (education, profession etc.), and motivations (as in McAteer et al., 2021). This gap in  
9 reporting consequently makes it difficult to learn from prior work. For example, having further  
10 information may help maintaining engagement of individuals in the initiatives (i.e. knowing and  
11 supporting their motivations), identifying strategies and populations that can be successful in CS (i.e.  
12 could start identifying which profiles are better suited for different objectives and tasks), as well as  
13 identifying novel groups to target to further improve the inclusivity of this CS approach (Aristeidou  
14 et al., 2017; Brouwer and Hessels, 2019; Hermoso et al., 2021; Lucrezi and Digun-Aweto, 2020).  
15 Thus, similarly to the lack of standardised protocols and measures, not reporting this information may  
16 prevent science from being able to replicate and advance this approach.

17         Knowing who the citizen scientists are may help to better develop and improve training, which  
18 is another aspect that was vaguely reported in our search results. Some initiatives did not train their  
19 citizen scientists, and for the majority of the initiatives, it was not mandatory prior to their  
20 participation. There is evidence in the literature that training can improve data quality (Bonney et al.,  
21 2016, 2009; Crall et al., 2017; Danielsen et al., 2014; van der Velde et al., 2017). Data errors and  
22 biases can be caused by differences in participants’ abilities (e.g., identification, detection, estimation;  
23 Dickinson et al., 2010; Kosmala et al., 2016) and experience (Kosmala et al., 2016). The task  
24 difficulty may also influence data quality and, consequently, initiatives with more complex tasks  
25 should require greater attention/dedication to the training development and assessment (Kosmala et  
26 al., 2016; Rambonnet et al., 2019). For instance, van der Velde et al. (2017) found differences in data

1 collected by primary school students trained by teachers who received a one-day training from those  
2 who received multi-day intensive training. The primary school students supervised by teachers with  
3 multi-day intensive training found significantly more marine litter during quadrat search than did  
4 other groups (e.g., secondary school students and adults). In this sense, knowing details of the protocol  
5 and how the training was conducted is important to assess the confidence in the findings, to allow  
6 reproducibility of the study, and for further improvements.

7 Training also has an important role in the scientific and environmental education of citizen  
8 scientists but having a training program is not a synonym of learning outcomes. It is common to find  
9 studies affirming that participating in the initiatives improved the citizen scientists' environmental  
10 and/or science education (Peter et al., 2019). However, the report of learning outcomes supported by  
11 data is uncommon in the literature and we could confirm this with our results.

12 In addition to the lack of evidence that learning outcomes have been achieved, this review  
13 also identified that other impacts on the citizen scientists have not been reported and/or assessed.  
14 According to the ECSA's principles, CS initiatives should aim to benefit (and to assess those benefits  
15 on) the citizens and society more broadly. Marine litter initiatives often intend to be enjoyable,  
16 interesting, and to promote more pro-environmental behaviours, but our review demonstrates that this  
17 was rarely reported. Those that reported an assessment on citizen scientists (with evidence), however,  
18 did demonstrate that experiential learning through the participation in a CS activity can foster  
19 environmental engagement (Hidalgo-Ruz and Thiel, 2013), positively influence knowledge and  
20 behaviour (Owens, 2018; Pahl and Wyles, 2017), or inspire citizen scientists to pursue academic  
21 environmental-related careers (Yeo et al., 2015). However, it has also been noted that the way citizen  
22 science experiences make people feel may be more important for fostering future environmental  
23 engagement than factual-based learning (Dean et al., 2018). Moreover, educational level and social  
24 status may determine a volunteer's level of understanding of scientific terms, current issues, and  
25 global versus local issues (Hermoso et al., 2021; Yeo et al., 2015), thus linking back to different needs  
26 for training noted above (Haklay et al., 2021b).

1           Looking at the volunteering literature more broadly, citizen science initiatives have a great  
2 potential to benefit individuals' physical and mental health. Insights from the behavioural sciences  
3 show that if individuals enjoy an activity, understand the problems and associated solutions, have a  
4 sense of agency, and have a positive attitude towards a socio-environmental issue, they are more  
5 likely to continue that activity (i.e., increasing retention of volunteers) and engage in related  
6 behaviours (e.g., perform other pro-environmental behaviours; see Gifford and Nilsson, 2014; Kruse  
7 et al., 2020b; Oturai et al., 2022). Thus, assessing and understanding if or how these initiatives could  
8 affect behaviour would help maximize retention of participants within the initiative itself; increase  
9 experience and knowledge among the citizen scientists, further improving the quality of the data  
10 collected; and could have a broader impact by encouraging pro-environmental behaviours in other  
11 contexts. Yet, our review highlights this as being a major gap in this current field. This gap does not  
12 seem exclusive to marine litter. Peter et al. (2019) only found 14 studies out of a sample of 62  
13 describing citizen scientists' outcomes in biodiversity-focused initiatives. Deguines et al. (2020)  
14 highlight that participating in citizen science initiatives has the potential to directly benefit local  
15 biodiversity "if such experience of nature leads to biodiversity-friendly behaviours in volunteers.  
16 However, whether engagement in nature-based CS programs promotes individual behavioural  
17 changes remains poorly known". In a review of climate change-focused initiatives (Groulx et al.,  
18 2017), only one study focusing on citizen scientists' assessment was found and it included non-  
19 empirical evidence in their analysis, which indicates the need to incorporate citizen scientists'  
20 assessment in the initiatives or report on it. In recent studies that evaluated the influence of the  
21 participation in citizen science activities on the promotion of pro-environmental behaviour,  
22 Wichmann et al. (2022) and Oturai et al. (2022) showed that school children did not show a significant  
23 change in perception of marine debris problem and in environmental behaviour after their  
24 participation in a plastic litter citizen science project. It is important to notice, however, that those  
25 school children already presented a high perception and involvement regarding plastic marine debris  
26 right in the beginning of the study, which was evidenced by the pretest that was applied by the authors.

1           Other studies that reported on the assessment of citizen scientists rarely did it in a systematic  
2 way, often relying on individual accounts and/or the researchers' impressions. Whilst this provides  
3 some insight, it does not demonstrate whether the act of engaging in these CS initiatives truly had an  
4 impact on the citizen scientists themselves. Optimally, the target impacts (be it changes in mood,  
5 literacy, or behaviour) should be measured before and after the initiatives using reliable and  
6 standardised measures to assess if there have been any changes (Pahl and Wyles, 2017; Phillips et al.,  
7 2018). This highlights the importance of combining expertise from different disciplines: (i) natural  
8 sciences to ensure good quality research is conducted, educators to ensure the learning outcomes are  
9 met, and (ii) social sciences to help maximise the benefits to citizen scientists and encourage greater  
10 engagement and retention.

11           Feedback from citizen scientists seems to be an even greater gap than the assessment. Most  
12 initiatives involve citizen scientists in a contributory way, reporting mainly on their involvement in  
13 data collection and rarely showing their contribution in other aspects of the scientific research,  
14 preventing valuable insights this kind of reporting might provide (Stevens et al., 2014). It is possible  
15 that in some cases the citizen scientists are satisfied by only participating as data collectors. However,  
16 we cannot be sure if we do not ask them. In fact, participation in scientific projects can provide citizen  
17 scientists an opportunity to expand their personal knowledge, to make them feel recognised and  
18 appreciated for their individual contributions to science, to see the impact of their work on their local  
19 community, and to better understand the issues pertaining to environmental policy that affect them  
20 (Brouwer and Hessels, 2019; Rotman et al., 2012), opening doors to a wider range of potential  
21 outcomes (Brouwer and Hessels, 2019; Crall et al., 2017; Merenlender et al., 2016; Shirk et al., 2012).

22

#### 23 **4.4. Filling the gaps**

24           Overall, it is evident that citizen science has made a valuable contribution to the field of  
25 marine litter, in terms of collecting vital data, engaging the public, and ultimately impacting society.  
26 However, to maximise these benefits, some improvements are recommended in the science behind



1 citizen science (Table 1), mainly related to standardisation and coverage of the results related to  
2 marine litter as well as the incorporation, better reporting, and explicit analysis of aspects related to  
3 the citizen scientists. First, the standardisation of data collection methods and in the way the results  
4 are reported (e.g., using same size scales or comprehensive categories of litter) is fundamental to  
5 allow for the comparison across different locations and periods of time, which will ultimately allow  
6 a broader view of the issue and guide decision making. Second, the expansion of geographical  
7 coverage, with the inclusion of more initiatives in Africa is also urgent. Third, since the advance in  
8 CS ultimately depends on its social dimension, publications featuring marine litter CS initiatives  
9 should report not only the results related to the litter (e.g., types, sizes, abundance, sources, and  
10 pathways) but also basic and general information about the citizen scientists with more detail (e.g.,  
11 demographics and profile of citizen scientists, recruitment and training strategies, level of  
12 involvement in the scientific inquiry). Moreover, it is highly advisable that, whenever possible,  
13 marine litter citizen science initiatives adopt already well-established methodologies for the report of  
14 sociological aspects (e.g., educational, and behavioural impacts on participants), and that the  
15 publication of such results in scientific journals is encouraged to foster the development of  
16 frameworks and standards on CS research and practice. The scientific context required for these  
17 studies is probably so extensive that they must be reported in separate publications. However, we  
18 encourage these evaluations since they will not only provide important insights for strengthening the  
19 citizen science approach, but they will also help to significantly enhance the societal impact of citizen  
20 science initiatives by facilitating positive behavioural change. It is possible that some initiatives are  
21 already doing this but publishing elsewhere. Scientific journals that publish articles on CS that are  
22 related to marine litter could, for example, give some space for the reporting of these aspects related  
23 to citizen scientists, increasing the scope of existing good practices, especially those from empirical  
24 studies that are based on social or educational sciences methodologies and theories; authors should  
25 also use the opportunity to provide extensive information about these aspects in the electronic

1 supplementary space offered by most scientific journals. This information is necessary for future  
 2 comparative studies and meta-analyses, which in turn would help to advance this approach.

3

4 **Table 1.** Main recommendations derived from the systematic review of marine litter citizen science  
 5 literature.

Aspect	Recommendation
Geographical coverage	The planning and implementation of more initiatives in the Southern Hemisphere, especially in Africa, is urgent. Integration of the results of initiatives from different localities could broaden the scope and the impact of the results of current subnational and local initiatives. Financial incentives are recommended.
Data and results/conclusions availability	There is a need to increase the accessibility to data and the results/conclusions of the initiatives to the general public, for example, through the use of open web-based citizen science platforms.
Acknowledgement	It is mandatory that all scientific publications that relied on citizen science data somehow acknowledge the participation of citizen scientists.
Removal of litter	All marine litter citizen science initiatives should remove the litter, and report on its removal from the environment, after the recording process.
Litter sizes	Standardization of the size scales adopted in the protocols is recommended to allow comparisons and meta-analyses. The development and validation of objective and simple citizen science protocols for the study of meso and microlitter are possibilities.
Types of litter	Standardization of the names of litter categories across different protocols and the use of comprehensive categories is recommended to allow comparisons and meta-analyses.
Report on citizen scientists	At least basic demographics and the profile of the participants; recruitment and training strategies; and the level of participants' involvement in the scientific inquiry should be reported by all scientific publications involving marine litter citizen science.
Assessment of citizen scientists	It is advisable that citizen science initiatives consider the assessment of perceptions, learning outcomes and behavioural changes of the participants. It is also recommended that scientific journals that encourage citizen science publications to open some space for the authors to include such aspects of citizen scientists' assessment in the articles.

6

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8

## 1 **5. Conclusion**

2 As citizen science is a tool to connect two groups (scientists and citizens), it is necessary to  
3 acknowledge and report these approaches in a holistic manner, reporting both the aspects related to  
4 the environmental issue and those related to the citizen scientists themselves. Reviewing a rapidly  
5 growing area of citizen science approaches within marine litter, this paper examined what is currently  
6 being reported within the scientific literature and if this is fit for purpose to help advance this  
7 approach. Whilst the results were able to identify some gaps related to the report of marine litter  
8 aspects, a key finding was the lack of comprehensive reporting of aspects related to the citizen  
9 scientists. Thus, to address the overarching goal of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for  
10 Sustainable Development (IOC/UNESCO, 2020), this paper provides recommendations that may  
11 help build the *science* we need for the *citizen science* we want and, consequently, the *citizen science*  
12 we need for the *ocean* we want.

13

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1

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9

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13

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