

Sample size requirements for riverbank macrolitter characterization

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16 Abstract

17 Anthropogenic litter is omnipresent in terrestrial and freshwater systems, and can have major economic
18 and ecological impacts. Monitoring and modelling of anthropogenic litter comes with large
19 uncertainties due to the wide variety of litter characteristics, including size, mass, and item type. It is
20 unclear as to what the effect of sample set size is on the reliability and representativeness of litter item
21 statistics. Reliable item statistics are needed to (1) improve monitoring strategies, (2) parameterize
22 litter in transport models, and (3) convert litter counts to mass for stock and flux calculations. In this
23 paper we quantify sample set size requirement for riverbank litter characterization, using a database of
24 more than 14,000 macrolitter items (>0.5 cm), sampled for one year at eight riverbank locations along
25 the Dutch Rhine, IJssel and Meuse rivers. We use this database to perform a Monte Carlo based
26 bootstrap analysis on the item statistics, to determine the relation between sample size and variability
27 in the mean and median values. Based on this, we present sample set size requirements, corresponding
28 to selected uncertainty and confidence levels. Optima between sampling effort and information gain is
29 suggested (depending on the acceptable uncertainty level), which is a function of litter type
30 heterogeneity. We found that the heterogeneity of the characteristics of litter items varies between
31 different litter categories, and demonstrate that the minimum required sample set size depends on the
32 heterogeneity of the litter category. More items of heterogeneous litter categories need to be sampled
33 than of homogeneous item categories to reach the same uncertainty level in item statistics. For
34 example, to describe the mean mass the heterogeneous category soft fragments (>2.5cm) with 90%
35 confidence, 990 items were needed, while only 39 items were needed for the uniform category metal
36 bottle caps. Finally, we use the heterogeneity within litter categories to assess the sample size
37 requirements for each river system. All data collected for this study are freely available, and may form
38 the basis of an open access global database which can be used by scientists, practitioners, and
39 policymakers to improve future monitoring strategies and modelling efforts.

40 1. Introduction

41 Anthropogenic litter (hereinafter called litter) is omnipresent in the natural environment and has major
42 economic consequences such as damage to vessels, and ecological impacts including ingestion and
43 entanglement (van Emmerik and Schwartz, 2020; Lau et al., 2020). Litter is defined as any solid
44 manufactured waste item that enters the environment through intentional or unintentional improper
45 disposal (McCormick and Hoellein, 2016). In response to these threats many efforts have been made
46 to reduce the amount of litter in the natural environment. Understanding and quantifying litter sources,
47 transport, and accumulation processes may increase the efficacy of prevention and reduction efforts.
48 Previous studies have demonstrated that the transport and accumulation of litter in water, both in the
49 vertical and horizontal dimension, strongly depends on the interaction between the fluid dynamics and
50 the characteristics of the litter (Morales-Caselles et al., 2021; Kuizenga et al., 2022). For example, the
51 settling rate and transport of litter in water is affected by the density, surface area and size of the litter
52 (Kukulka et al., 2012; Chubarenko et al., 2016; Kowalski et al., 2016; Schwarz et al., 2019). Pedrotti
53 et al. (2016) observed that in the Mediterranean Sea the abundance of high-density polymers decreased
54 when moving away from the coast. Furthermore, wind driven transport of litter on land strongly
55 depends on the density, shape, and size of litter items as well (Garello, et al., 2021; Mellink et al.,
56 2022b). Finally, the retention of litter in (riparian) vegetation depends on the size and shape of the litter
57 (Cesarini & Scalici, 2022). To improve our understanding of the behavior of litter in the natural
58 environment, such as litter transport pathways and fate, and to improve litter monitoring and modelling,
59 it is therefore essential to identify the variability litter characteristic and the corresponding statistics,
60 and the implications of this variability for sampling efforts.

61 Litter is a heterogeneous entity (Roebroek et al., 2021), as it comes in many shapes (Ballerini et al.,
62 2022), varying in size, mass, density, and the rate at which it degrades over time (Delorme et al., 2021).
63 Uncertainty arises when a generalized value, such as an average, is used to represent a heterogeneous
64 variable like litter (Schwarz et al., 2019). However, it is unclear what the relation is between sample
65 set size and reliability and representativeness of the statistics. Reliable item statistics are needed to
66 improve monitoring efficiency, when determining how many items need to be sampled to characterize
67 a system. Furthermore, transport models should be parameterized with reliable item category statistics,
68 since litter transport and retention dynamics strongly depend on the material characteristics. Roebroek
69 et al. (2022) show that litter transport model uncertainty decreases with several orders of magnitude
70 with increasing availability of litter data. Consequently, litter transport models that do not accurately
71 capture litter heterogeneity, inevitably feature a greater level of uncertainty. Furthermore, litter
72 heterogeneity introduces additional uncertainties in the conversion of litter amounts (and fluxes) to
73 mass (per unit time), and vice versa (van Calcar & van Emmerik, 2019). Such conversions often rely
74 on generalized litter masses to convert the observed number of items to a total mass (Vriend et al.,
75 2020b). For specific rivers the uncertainty can be several orders of magnitude (Roebroek et al., 2022).
76 Due to the heterogeneous nature of litter, a generalized conversion factor based on generalized litter
77 masses, induces higher uncertainty, and consequently a representative value per litter type is ideally
78 needed.

79 This study presents an approach to determine what sample size is needed for representative and reliable
80 litter statistics. This analysis is based on a dataset containing the characteristics (item category, length,
81 width and mass) of more than 14,000 riverbank litter items. We found that increasing the sample set
82 size decreases the uncertainty in the sampled litter statistics. However, it was found that reducing
83 uncertainty through increasing sample set size, levels off beyond a certain sample set size. We also
84 found that the heterogeneity of the characteristics of litter items varies between different litter
85 categories and demonstrate that the minimum required sample set size depends on the heterogeneity of

86 the litter category. With the dataset and analysis presented in this study we aim to contribute to
87 improving the efficiency of litter monitoring strategies, the accuracy of litter transport models, and the
88 conversion of litter item counts to litter masses for stock and flux calculations.

89 **2. Methods**

90 **2.1. Study area**

91 The catchments of the studied rivers Rhine, IJssel and Meuse (Figure 1), are heavily industrialized and
92 densely populated (~ 300 inhabitants/km²) (van der Wal et al., 2013). The river Rhine (Bovenrijn)
93 enters the Netherlands at Spijk, 161 km from the river mouth. At 147 km the Rhine bifurcates into the
94 Waal (67% of the discharge), Nederrijn (22%) and IJssel (11%) (Schielen et al., 2007). The Waal and
95 Nederrijn then converge at 42 km from the river mouth. The river Meuse enters the Netherlands at
96 Eijsden, 250 km from the river mouth, and discharges 10% of the mean discharge of the Rhine-system
97 (230 m³/s and 2200 m³/s respectively). Near the coast (~ 80 km from the sea), the branches of the Rhine
98 and Meuse systems converge and intertwine. Ultimately, the Rhine-Meuse system drains into the North
99 Sea, while the river IJssel drains into lake IJssel after 125 km.

100 Sampling locations were chosen to be at the upstream and downstream end of the Dutch section of the
101 rivers Rhine (R), Meuse (M) and IJssel (IJ) (Figure 1). Supplementary Materials A provides a detailed
102 description of the sampling areas. The sampling areas at Nijmegen (R1) and Rotterdam (R3) are located
103 along the river Rhine, while Arnhem (R2) is located at the Nederrijn beyond the first major bifurcation
104 of the Rhine. Arnhem (IJ1) and Kampen (IJ2) are situated on the river IJssel, while the river Meuse
105 was sampled at locations in Maastricht (M1), Ravenstein (M2) and Moerdijk (M3). Location M3 is
106 located beyond the point where the rivers Rhine and Meuse merge, and is therefore affected by both
107 river systems. Location M3 and R3 are in the tidal zone, and can therefore be subject to bidirectional
108 currents.

109 **2.2. Sample collection and processing**

110 Riverbank macrolitter was collected once per month between January and December 2021 at eight
111 riverbank sites. Location R2 was sampled only in January and December, and location M1 was not
112 sampled in January due to limited sample collection and processing capacity. The width of the sampling
113 area was defined as the distance from the waterline to the high waterline, having a maximum value of
114 25 m (van Emmerik et al., 2020). The waterline is defined here as the interface between the river and
115 the riverbank. The high waterline can be identified in the field by the fact that a proportion of the
116 organic matter floating at the river surface is deposited at this elevation along the water margin once
117 the peak flow begins to recede. Sampling was carried out until one of the following criteria was met:
118 (1) coverage of 100 meters length, (2) collection of material equaling 80 liters, or (3) a sampling time
119 exceeding 90 minutes. These limits were set based upon the availability of surveyors for the sample
120 collection, the state of the riverbank (the required sampling time can be considerably higher if there is
121 dense vegetation), and available capacity for subsequent laboratory analysis of the sampled material.
122 The width of the sampled locations varied between 1 and 10 m and the length between 10 and 100
123 meters. It should be noted that riverbank sampling is biased towards larger items, since smaller items
124 are more difficult to identify by eye (Hanke et al., 2019), hence statistics for the smaller macrolitter
125 items (< 1 cm) should be taken with caution.

126
127 Collected samples were analyzed in the Laboratory for Water and Sediment Dynamics at Wageningen
128 University. First, the items were manually and superficially cleaned of sediment and organic debris to
129 preserve the state in which they were sampled. Superficial cleaning was performed to remove sediment

130 and organic debris from the items. Items may have fragmented during transport, which may have led
131 to more litter items being analyzed in the lab oratory than originally sampled. Second, the items were
132 categorized using the River-OSPAR protocol (supplementary materials B), developed by the North
133 Sea Foundation (van Emmerik et al., 2020). This protocol is based on the OSPAR guidelines for beach
134 litter monitoring (OSPAR commission, 2010), with adjusted categories to better account for items
135 frequently found in (Dutch) rivers. The protocol includes 111 specific item categories, divided over
136 nine parent categories (i.e. plastic, rubber, textile, paper, wood, metal, glass, sanitary, and medical
137 items). The River-OSPAR categorization system gives a detailed overview of the abundance of various
138 types of litter. To facilitate direct comparison with other categorization methods in future research
139 efforts, we included a ‘conversion table’ (Supplementary materials F) for rapid re-categorization in one
140 of the other published categorization methods (Vriend et al., 2020a; Schwarz et al., 2019; Kiessling et
141 al., 2019; Nally et al., 2017; Fleet et al., 2021).

142
143 Finally, we determined the mass, length and width of the 14,052 items sampled between January and
144 May, and in the months of August and November. Due to limited resources, items were not analyzed
145 in the other months. The mass was weighed on a scale (0.01 g accuracy). In case individual items did
146 not reach the minimum detectable mass, multiple items of the same category were weighed
147 collectively, and a mean value assigned to each. For item length and width, the two longest axes were
148 measured with a 0.1 cm accuracy.

149 **2.3. Data analysis**

150 **2.3.1. Determination of item category heterogeneity**

151 Category heterogeneity Ψ [-] was used to assess item category variability. This represents the
152 normalized standard deviation (also known as coefficient of variation) and is defined as

$$153 \Psi = \frac{\sigma}{\mu} \quad (\text{equation 1})$$

154 in which σ is the standard deviation and μ is the mean of a certain category parameter, such as item
155 length or mass.

156

157 **2.3.2. Determination of sample set size requirements**

158 The number of items needed to accurately represent category statistics depends on the category
159 heterogeneity. We studied the relation between statistical uncertainty and sample size, which can be
160 used to determine how many items are required for a representative and reliable value of the mean item
161 mass across all riverbanks (sample set size requirement; SSR). A representative value means that the
162 subset of the population accurately reflects the characteristics of the full population, while a reliable
163 value means that the method to determine this value consistently has the same outcome. To this end,
164 we randomly drew a subset from the total set and calculated the mean mass. The size of the subset
165 ranged from one item to all items in the total set. Next, a Monte Carlo based bootstrap analysis was
166 performed 10,000 times for each subset size to determine the deviation of the subset from the dataset
167 mean. From these runs, we calculated the 50, 75, 90 and 95% confidence intervals. These simulations
168 were run using all litter categories lumped together, and for each single item category with more than
169 ten sampled items (59 out of 111 item categories, representing 89% of the total number of items). In
170 this way, the number of items needed to give a representative estimate (within a certain confidence
171 interval) of the mean mass of an item category could be determined. A deviation of 5, 10 or 20% of
172 the actual mean value (the mean mass based on the whole category) is given. All subsequent analysis
173 was performed for the 90% confidence interval with a 10% deviation from mean, and the results might
174 change for different combinations of those. Finally, the same analysis was carried out to calculate the
175 values for median mass and mean length for all items, and as an example for two item categories (soft

176 fragments >2.5 cm and metal bottle caps). This analysis could be performed for other item variables
 177 (e.g. length, width) and statistics (median) as well, but was considered out of scope for the present
 178 study.

180 2.3.3. Determination of river system heterogeneity

181 The concept of litter heterogeneity and SSRs per item category can be upscaled to a riverbank location
 182 or even a whole river-system, to allow for characterization of heterogeneity at various scales. The
 183 heterogeneity of a location or a river system is based on the items found in this system, and the
 184 corresponding SSRs. Based on the SSR for a 90% confidence interval and a deviation of 10% from the
 185 mean, an item category is defined as homogeneous, heterogeneous or mixed based on the median SSR,
 186 the median SSR and mean SSR of all categories:

187
 188 Homogeneous: $SSR_i < \eta (SSR_{all})$
 189 Mixed: $\eta (SSR_{all}) \leq SSR_i \leq \mu (SSR_{all})$
 190 Heterogeneous: $\mu (SSR_{all}) < SSR_i$

191
 192 in which μ is the mean and η the median of SSR_i . SSR_i is the sample set size requirement for item
 193 category i , while SSR_{all} represents the SSRs of the whole population.

194
 195 Finally, if less than 10 items were collected, no SSR was calculated, and the item heterogeneity was
 196 left undefined. All items found within a system were classified this way, and subsequently the ratio
 197 between homogeneous, mixed, heterogeneous and undefined items were determined on multiple
 198 scales. This allowed for comparison between the riverbank locations, and between the Meuse, Rhine
 199 and IJssel river systems.

200 3. Results and Discussion

201 3.1. Riverbank macrolitter classification

202 In total 16,488 items (184 kg) were collected and categorized from eight riverbanks over 12 months,
 203 of which 14,052 (85%) were measured and weighed. For a detailed description of the length
 204 distribution of the items, see Supplementary Materials E. The majority of items were plastics (70% of
 205 item count, 33% of total mass) and mainly composed of unidentifiable plastic fragments (50% of all
 206 items) (Table 1). This result is in line with the findings of van Emmerik et al. (2020), who found 55.8%
 207 of riverbank litter items to be fragments along the Dutch Rhine-Meuse system. Although plastic
 208 dominates the collected item count (Table 1), local spatial variations exist (Figure 2). This can mainly
 209 be contributed to the type and use of riverbank (supplementary materials A), which play a role in which
 210 items are trapped and retained (Liro et al., 2022). For example, recreational areas, such as R1, show a
 211 lower percentage of plastic items (for example only 15% of item counts for R1) and are dominated by
 212 consumer items such as cigarette filters, metal bottle caps and glass bottles.

213 The average item mass was 11.1 g (6.1 g for plastics), and the median mass was 0.55 g (0.53 g for
 214 plastics) (Table 1). The summarizing statistics per item category can be found in Supplementary
 215 materials C. The difference between the mean and median mass indicated a highly positively skewed
 216 distribution with many light items and relatively few heavy outliers. The large number of fragments
 217 (for example soft fragments, hard fragments, foam fragments) are responsible for this skewedness
 218 (Figure 3a). Heavy outliers include items of scrap metal such as bikes, and metal pipes (Figure 3b).
 219 The skewed distribution may have far reaching consequences for setting up a mass-balance using only
 220 summarizing statistics. For example, estimates of floating plastic flux, based upon items per hour

221 (which is subsequently converted to mass per year), can differ by an order of magnitude when using
222 either the mean or the median mass for this conversion (van Emmerik et al, 2022).

223 The ten most frequently found items (Figure 3) represent 56% of the total amount of items and 65% of
224 the total mass. The twenty most abundant items represent 66% of the total item count and 87% of the
225 total mass, respectively. The top ten items vary strongly when considering the item count or mass as
226 demonstrated in Figure 3. In terms of frequency, plastic fragments, food packaging, and items related
227 to consumables and cigarette filters are the most abundant categories (Figure 3a). In terms of mass, the
228 top ten items mainly consist of higher-density items such as metal (mean mass 41 g), wood (mean mass
229 176 g) and glass (mean mass 27 g) (Figure 3b). This discrepancy between abundance in count and mass
230 emphasizes the importance of mass statistics for reliable estimates of litter mass balances. Although
231 accumulated material on riverbanks is often expressed in item count per surface area, item mass per
232 surface area is more relevant for closing the mass balance. Considering that items will likely increase
233 over time due to fragmentation, we consider item mass per surface area a more appropriate indicator
234 for riverbank litter accumulation.

235 **3.2. Item category heterogeneity**

236 Item characteristics in the dataset can vary significantly within and between litter categories. To be
237 able to give an accurate measure of mean, median and standard deviation of litter item categories
238 (Supplementary material C), the sample size must be large enough to capture the mass and length
239 variability within a category. The number of items needed to accurately represent category statistics
240 (within a certain uncertainty level), depends on the heterogeneity of the category. Aggregated
241 categories in the River-OSPAR system (e.g. soft fragments larger than 2.5 cm), may have large
242 variability in item mass and size. For categories consisting of relatively uniform items (e.g. cigarette
243 filters) this may be the opposite. The variability within a category can be characterized by a category
244 heterogeneity Ψ (Equation 1) and is presented as histograms of length and mass (Figure 4). Wider
245 distributions, such as that of soft and hard fragments, belong to more heterogeneous item categories,
246 which is reflected in Ψ (1.03 and 0.92 for item length, respectively). Note the axis scale break in the x-
247 axes of subfigures 4f through 4j, which indicate a wider histogram than inferred from the visible
248 histogram. Narrower distributions, such as cigarette filters and metal bottle caps are described by a
249 lower category heterogeneity ($\Psi = 0.08$ and $\Psi = 0.14$ for item length, respectively). Item heterogeneity
250 is one of the most important factors that determines how many items should be sampled to obtain
251 representative item statistics and these SSRs are discussed below.

252 **3.3. Sample set size requirements**

253 By collecting more litter items, the item statistics (such as median and mean mass or length for
254 example) become less uncertain, and this is especially relevant for heterogeneous litter categories. The
255 amount of statistical uncertainty decreases with increasing sample size, meaning that the possible range
256 of outcomes of the mean or median from the subset, differs increasingly less from the total population.
257 However, uncertainty shows an inverse exponential decrease with sample size. Larger sample sizes
258 only reduce statical uncertainty to a minor extent after a certain threshold. This threshold represents
259 the minimum number of item samples that is required in order to obtain a representative number (within
260 certain confidence bounds) of mass and length statistics.

261 To describe the mean mass of all litter at the sample locations with a maximum deviation of 10% of
262 the mean based upon the total population with 90% confidence, at least 8,900 items need to be sampled
263 and measured (63% of the total amount of weighed items). To capture the representative mean length
264 1,200 items (9%) need to be collected, while only 173 items (1%) are needed to describe the median

265 mass (Figures 5a through 5d). The more heterogeneous an item category, the more samples need to be
266 collected to obtain representative mass and length statistics. An example for the SSR of a homogeneous
267 and a heterogeneous subclass is presented for the heterogeneous category “soft fragments larger than
268 2.5 cm”, 990 items (42% of full sample) are needed to find a mean mass (within 10% of the mean mass
269 based on the full population) with 90% confidence (Figure 5e through 5h). When determining the mean
270 mass of homogeneous item categories such as “metal bottle caps” (Figure 5i through 5l), only 38 (6%
271 of full sample) items suffice.

272 The number of samples to be collected and measured depends on the acceptable confidence boundary
273 and a maximum level of deviation from the mean of the total population. In the aforementioned
274 examples, a maximum deviation of 10% was allowed and estimated with 90% confidence. With these
275 conditions, an accurate representation of the mean mass of food packaging is reached when 150 items
276 are measured. However, if a deviation of +/- 20% is permitted, only 110 items are needed to reach the
277 uncertainty required. Similarly, if a confidence boundary of 50% is permitted, only 95 items are
278 required to represent the mean mass (+/- 10%). The level of confidence and maximum level of
279 deviation allowed therefore impact the SSR.

280 We show the SSR of 59 item categories with more than 10 items in Table 2, which may be used in to
281 find a balance between statistical uncertainty and sampling effort in future monitoring efforts. These
282 59 item categories make up 89% of total amount of collected items. The mean SSR equals 158 items,
283 while the median equals 40 items. Our dataset does not include sufficient samples for all categories to
284 provide an estimate of the mean mass within the selected confidence boundaries and deviations of the
285 mean in this study. When the number of items needed to represent the mean mass is equal to the total
286 number of items collected (indicated by the red shade in Table 2), or when a level of uncertainty
287 (confidence boundary and deviation from the mean) is never reached (represented by N/A in Table 2),
288 it is not possible to provide a SSR. For the highest confidence boundary (95%) and lowest deviation
289 from mean (5%), this is the case for 37 items categories. Table 2 also shows the category heterogeneity
290 for each item category, calculated based upon the available dataset, even if it was not sufficiently large
291 enough to determine SSRs. As demonstrated in the aforementioned examples, to obtain the same
292 uncertainty levels in the mass-size statistics of riverbank litter, the SSRs of heterogeneous item
293 categories are higher than of homogeneous item categories. This is underlined by the correlation (R-
294 squared) between SSR and category heterogeneity for these 59 item categories, which is on average
295 0.45, but varies between 0.12 and 0.60.

296 The SSRs can be the baseline for monitoring protocol design and serve as a rule of thumb or indication
297 when making an initial design. If required, the SSR analysis can be expanded to calculate SSR based
298 on median mass, mean or median length and mean or median width, based on this dataset. Since the
299 SSR analysis depends on the used item categorization method, we included a ‘conversion table’
300 (Supplementary materials F) for rapid re-categorization in one of the other published litter
301 categorization methods (Vriend et al., 2020a; Schwarz et al., 2019; Kiessling et al., 2019; Nally et al.,
302 2017; Fleet et al., 2021).

303 **3.4. River system heterogeneity**

304 The SSRs of the litter items can be used to assess the heterogeneity of specific locations or entire rivers.
305 This application is shown in Figure 6, which displays the litter heterogeneity based upon item count in
306 the Rhine (R1, R2, R3), Meuse (M1, M2, M3) and IJssel (IJ1, IJ2) rivers, assuming a 90% confidence
307 interval with maximum deviation of 10%. The litter on the riverbanks of the river Meuse and IJssel
308 belong mainly to heterogeneous categories such as the large amount of hard and soft plastic fragments

309 >2.5 cm (SSR 1300 and 1000, respectively). Contrastingly the river Rhine riverbanks encompass
310 mostly homogeneous categories. When zooming to location-level heterogeneity (Table 3), it is clear
311 that location R1 accounts for this. Location R1 can largely be described as a homogeneous sampling
312 location, which contributes to the large number of homogeneous items in location R1 (Table 3), such
313 as cigarette filters (SSR 11) and metal bottle caps (SSR 38) (Supplementary materials D). The
314 heterogeneity of each sampling location (assuming a 90% confidence interval with maximum deviation
315 of 10%) as shown in Table 3 strongly corresponds to the heterogeneity of its top 10 items
316 (Supplementary Materials D).

317
318 Heterogeneity and SSRs vary considerably within and between rivers, which emphasizes the need for
319 river and site-specific data collection. For example, more data should be collected for heterogeneous
320 systems. Therefore, identifying litter heterogeneity per system can give an indication as to the resource
321 investment required to accurately capture the systems' riverbank litter. When performing a Monte
322 Carlo bootstrap analysis on all items found within a river system, with a 90% confidence boundary and
323 a deviation of 10%, the river Rhine can be sampled by measuring 3,000 items (78% of all items found
324 along the river Rhine). Similarly, 6900 items (71%) are needed for the river Meuse, and 2000 (96%)
325 for the river IJssel. These items would give enough data to derive representative mean mass statistics,
326 but it does not provide any spatiotemporal information. The SSR of river IJssel comprise of almost all
327 items in our database, and more items should be collected to confirm the calculated SSR. The smaller
328 SSR for river Rhine indicates its homogeneous character, while the larger SSR for river Meuse again
329 confirms its more heterogeneous character. Furthermore, due to the intrinsic uncertainty within
330 heterogeneous items, the uncertainty in litter statistics will always be larger for heterogeneous systems
331 than for more homogeneous systems.

332 **4. Synthesis and outlook**

333 This study quantifies the sample size requirements of anthropogenic litter items and assesses their
334 heterogeneity, based upon more than 14,000 riverbank items. Our results show that statistical
335 uncertainties decrease with increasing sample set size, as might be expected, but the amount
336 information gain gradually diminishes when increasing the sample size. Therefore, determining the
337 appropriate sample size requires finding an optimum between the acceptable uncertainty and the
338 requisite sampling effort. In addition, the results demonstrate that heterogeneous litter item categories
339 require larger sample set sizes than homogeneous categories in order to obtain similar uncertainty
340 levels in the size and mass statistics.

341 The determination of litter heterogeneity and the derived required sample set sizes are crucial for
342 optimizing the efficiency of litter monitoring protocols. SSRs can make data collection more efficient,
343 as it is known for what item categories more and less items need to be collected and analyzed. The SSR
344 can serve as a limit on data collection to avoid wasting resources on collecting data with uncertainty
345 levels beyond the scope of the research question for which the data are used. This study provides a
346 method to estimate SSR, and gives a first indication of the order of magnitude of the number of items
347 that should be sampled for certain uncertainty levels for specific litter items. The approach taken in
348 this research can be transferred to other systems, and the findings can be used as a starting point for
349 studies in other river systems. For example, collecting homogeneous item categories can be performed
350 in less detail than measuring heterogeneous categories in future monitoring campaigns. Furthermore,
351 the analysis needed to optimize monitoring in these different systems can be adopted from this study.
352 By starting with collecting very detailed data, subsequent sample collection can be downscaled to
353 ensure more efficient monitoring. This can take the form of an iterative process, during which, at any

354 point in the study, the data needs can be reassessed by performing a Monte Carlo based bootstrap
355 analysis.

356 Litter transport and fate models can benefit from including litter statistics generated in this study. For
357 example, models used to study the transport behavior of litter could include the mass and size of
358 specific item categories. These parameters affect litter behavior associated with buoyancy or wind
359 sensitivity (Kuizenga et al., 2022; Mellink et al., 2022). Including such parameters will therefore help
360 to account for the fundamental transport and retention behavior of different litter categories in river
361 systems, and potentially improve model results.

362 Similarly, the data presented in this study can be used to improve models used to estimate the mass
363 transport of litter in rivers (see for example Meijer et al., 2021). Recent insights gained by Roebroek
364 et al. (2022) indicate that item-mass conversion is a significant contributor to model uncertainty in this
365 type of model. Our dataset on items-specific mass-statistics can thus be used to more accurately
366 perform this conversion, decreasing uncertainty in model results. The mass statistics of litter categories
367 can further be used to improve item count-to-mass conversion in studies that currently do not include
368 mass. Including mass in these datasets allows for data on environmental litter pollution to be compared
369 with litter production, leakage and transport, since all data are then expressed in the same units (mass
370 per unit time). This allows for the study of the relation between these fluxes. For example, our litter-
371 statistics can be used to include mass in datasets that were previously collected in item-count based
372 studies (e.g. Morales-Caselles et al., 2021; Crosti et al., 2018; Gonzalez-Fernandez et al., 2021). This
373 can now be directly compared with data from mass-based studies on, for example waste production
374 and plastic transport (e.g. Lebreton & Andrady, 2019, Meijer et al., 2021; Borrelle et al., 2020).
375 Including the mass statistics from our study may also reduce the uncertainty in studies that perform
376 item-to-mass conversion using limited data (e.g. Vriend et al., 2020b; van Emmerik et al., 2019).

377 Several steps can be taken to assess and improve the applicability of the data presented in this study.
378 First, it should be explored as to whether the SSR determined from the current data are river-system
379 specific or whether relevant parameters such as item-specific mass of SSRs are transferable between
380 river systems. Our findings will most likely be applicable to riverine systems with similar
381 climatological characteristics and similar industrial and consumption patterns. Differences in
382 consumption, activities (Nelms et al., 2021), waste management, riverbank morphologies and
383 vegetation (Liro et al., 2022) might lead to other types of litter being present and different size and
384 mass statistics in other river environments. By applying our methodology to existing litter datasets (e.g.
385 Tramoy et al., 2019) or by collecting a new dataset in a different type of river system, the universality
386 of our SSRs can be assessed. If the results are comparable between different types of river system, the
387 sample size requirements presented in this study could act as guidelines for future research thus guiding
388 the scale of future sampling efforts.

389 Second, the dataset presented in this study could form the basis for an open-access global database.
390 This is essential for improving litter monitoring and modelling efforts. Although global modelling
391 studies are extremely relevant to understand litter fluxes, litter data varies locally (Schwarz et al.,
392 2019), and local data are necessary to reduce the uncertainty in results. This local data can in turn be
393 upscaled to regional or global domains. The suggested open-access database can be used by scientists,
394 policymakers and stakeholders a to improve future monitoring, policymaking and solution designs.

395 **5. Concluding remarks**

396 We present a method to determine the sample size requirements for specific item categories and for
397 river systems. These may be used to optimize data collection efforts, by prioritizing the collection and
398 analysis of items that have a larger heterogeneity. The same size requirements vary considerably
399 between item categories and river systems. For a heterogeneous item class such as soft fragments larger
400 than 2.5 cm, 990 items were needed to describe the mean mass with 90% confidence, and when
401 determining the mean mass of uniform items, such as metal bottle caps, only 39 items were necessary.
402 At least 8,900 items had to be sampled in order to describe the mean mass of all litter items on all
403 locations with a confidence level of 90% and a maximum of 10% deviation from the mean. For
404 representative aggregated statistics on the river basin scale, 1645, 2065, 2033 items have to be sampled
405 for the Rhine, Meuse and IJssel, respectively. All collected data are openly available, and can be used
406 to optimize future monitoring efforts, and constrain model parameters. With this paper we aim to
407 contribute to reducing uncertainties in litter monitoring and modelling, to better understand and
408 quantify litter abundance, transport, fate, and impacts.

409 **Conflict of Interest**

410 The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial
411 relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

412 **Author Contributions**

413 Conceptualization: TvE, SdL

414 Methodology: TvE, SdL

415 Formal Analysis: SdL

416 Investigation: SdL

417 Visualization: SdL, PT

418 Data collection: all authors

419 Writing—original draft: SdL, YM, PV

420 Writing—reviewing and editing: SdL, YM, PV, PT, TvE, FB, RH, VV, EH, NJ, LS

421 Project administration: TvE

422 Funding acquisition: TvE, SdL

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438 **Data Availability Statement**

439 All data are openly available through the 4TU repository DOI 10.4121/19188131

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553 **Figure 1. The study area (a) with the sample areas (Google Earth; Landsat and Copernicus) (b).**
 554 **b) The white line has a length of 100 m. Supplementary materials B provide more detailed**
 555 **information on the riverbanks. Sampling locations are chosen at the upstream and downstream**
 556 **end of the Dutch part of the river Rhine (R), Meuse (M) and IJssel (IJ). The river Meuse has an**
 557 **additional midpoint measurement, and the river Rhine has an additional sampling area beyond**
 558 **the first major bifurcation. The sampling areas at Nijmegen (R1; sandy; 130 km from the**
 559 **mouth), Arnhem (R2; sandy; 130 km from the mouth) and Rotterdam (R3; stones; 30 km from**
 560 **the mouth) characterize the river Rhine, Arnhem (IJ1; sandy; 125 km from the mouth) and**
 561 **Kampen (IJ2; vegetated; 16 km from the mouth) characterize the river IJssel, and the river**
 562 **Meuse was sampled at a location in Maastricht (M1; vegetated; 250 km from the mouth),**
 563 **Ravenstein (M2; vegetated; 138 km from the mouth) and Moerdijk (M3; vegetated; 56 km from**
 564 **the mouth).**

565 **Figure 1. Map showing the eight riverbank locations along the Dutch Rhine (R1, R2, and R3),**
 566 **Meuse (M1 and M2), and IJssel (IJ1 and IJ2) rivers. For each location, the total number of litter**
 567 **items (left pie chart) and the total mass of litter items (right pie chart) found for the nine parent**
 568 **litter categories (plastic, rubber, textile, paper, wood, metal, glass, sanitary, and medical) is**
 569 **shown. The diameters of the pie charts indicate the total amount and mass of the items.**

570 **Figure 2. List of the top 10 most frequently found items based upon (a) item amount and (b)**
 571 **mass. Item categories are defined as *homogeneous* (italic), heterogeneous (bold), mixed (normal)**
 572 **or *undefined* (grey) based on the analysis below.**

573 **Figure 4. Length and mass distribution of the five most commonly found items, and their**
 574 **corresponding category heterogeneity Ψ . The scale break in the x-axis of subfigures f through j**
 575 **indicate a wider histogram than inferred from the visible histogram.**

576 **Figure 3. Examples of the sampling size requirement based on all items (a-d), soft fragments >2.5**
 577 **cm (e-h), and bottle caps (i-l). The sampling size requirement is shown for an accurate**
 578 **representation of mean mass, median mass and mean length, based on a 95% confidence interval,**
 579 **represented as a deviation from the value based on the complete dataset. The dashed horizontal**
 580 **lines indicate +/- 10%. In figure A, E and I the standard deviation (std), skewness (sk) and**
 581 **kurtosis (kur) of the distribution is shown, indicating item class homogeneity.**

582 **Figure 4. River system heterogeneity based on a 90% confidence boundary and 10% deviation**
 583 **from the mean, in the river Rhine (R1, R2, R3), Meuse (M1, M2, M3) and IJssel (IJ1, IJ2).**
 584 **Homogeneous: $SSR_{category} \leq \text{median } SSR_{all}$ (40 items). Heterogeneous; $SSR_{category} \geq \text{mean } SSR_{all}$**
 585 **(158 items). Mixed: $\text{median } SSR_{all} < SSR_{category} < \text{mean } SSR_{all}$. Undefined: SSR could not be**
 586 **determined.**

587

588 **Table 1. Statistics of all the collected litter. *in parentheses: the number of months in which lab**
 589 **analysis was performed.**

Loca tion	Length of measure ment periods*	Most commonly found item (Supplementary materials D)	Total numbe r of items	Total mass of items (kg)	Total number of plastic items	Total mass of plastic items (kg)	Median mass (g)	Mean mass (g)	Mean item density (items/m)	Mean mass density (g/m)
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All	-	Soft fragment (>=2.5 cm) (14%)	16,488	184	11,596 (70%)	61 (33%)	0.55	11	8.13	38.5
R1	12 (7)	Cigarette filter (49%)	3,193	12	471 (15%)	2.7 (22%)	0.55	4.8	3.32	7.01
R2	2 (1)	Other metal (<50 cm) (26%)	378	1	231 (61%)	0.29 (27%)	0.55	3.1	2.55	6.79
R3	12 (7)	Soft fragment (>=2.5 cm) (23%)	1,141	47	702 (62%)	10 (22%)	3.30	49	2.52	41.0
M1	11 (9)	Hard fragment (>=2.5 cm) (9%)	4,983	20	4,540 (91%)	13 (66%)	0.53	4.3	15.1	54.4
M2	12 (7)	Soft fragment (>=2.5 cm) (27%)	1,286	33	1,130 (88%)	12 (38%)	0.70	28	3.27	23.3
M3	12 (7)	Soft fragment (>=2.5 cm) (24%)	3,429	25	3,119 (91%)	17 (69%)	0.49	9.3	32.7	154
IJ1	12 (7)	Wet tissue (19%)	422	35	231 (55%)	0.42 (1%)	0.67	90	0.346	4.44
IJ2	12 (7)	Soft fragment (>=2.5 cm) (27%)	1,656	11	1,172 (71%)	4.0 (36%)	0.30	8.4	5.29	17.12

590

591 **Table 2. Sample set size requirements based on mean mass for a selection of categories in the**
592 **study database with more than 10 items. Full table can be accessed in Supplementary Materials**
593 **G. Requirements are given for various confidence boundaries and deviations from the mean. Red**
594 **numbers indicate that the number of items needed to represent the mean mass is equal to the**
595 **total number of items collected. N/A means that this level of uncertainty (confidence boundary**
596 **and deviation from the mean) is never reached, and more items need to be collected.**

OSPAR-ID	Name	Total number of items	μ_{mass} (g)	σ_{mass} (g)	ψ (-)	Deviation from mean											
						20%				10%				5%			
						Confidence boundary				Confidence boundary				Confidence boundary			
0.5	0.75	0.9	0.95	0.5	0.75	0.9	0.95	0.5	0.75	0.9	0.95	0.5	0.75	0.9	0.95		
3	Small bag	44	12.5	26.4	2.1	30	36	39	40	34	39	42	43	38	41	43	44
4.1	Bottle (>= 0.5 L)	34	80.0	176.7	2.2	1	1	29	30	1	32	34	34	30	32	34	34
4.2	Bottle (< 0.5 L)	127	40.4	75.1	1.9	34	63	82	90	74	110	120	120	110	120	N/A	N/A
4.3	Bottle label	23	4.6	9.4	2.1	18	21	22	23	21	22	23	23	22	23	23	23
6	Food packaging	170	9.1	18.6	2.0	42	79	110	120	95	140	150	160	150	160	170	170
7	Cosmetics packaging	19	17.0	16.7	1.0	8	13	15	16	14	17	18	18	18	19	19	19
15	Caps and lids	300	3.2	7.5	2.4	50	130	170	190	160	220	250	260	240	270	290	300
16	Lighter	38	11.7	3.5	0.3	1	3	6	8	4	10	16	18	12	22	28	30
20	Toy	18	52.3	111.2	2.1	14	16	18	18	15	17	18	18	17	18	18	18
21	Cup	116	3.2	7.7	2.5	51	77	90	95	88	110	110	N/A	110	110	N/A	N/A

597

598 **Table 3. Litter heterogeneity per sample site, based on mean mass with a 90% confidence**
599 **boundary and 10% deviation from the mean, in the river Rhine (R1, R2, R3), Meuse (M1, M2,**
600 **M3) and IJssel (IJ1, IJ2).**

Locat ion	Homogeneous (%)	Mixed (%)	Heteroge neous (%)	Undefined (%)
All	16	13	64	7
R1	73	9	16	2

R2	7	5	62	26
R3	12	25	57	5
M1	8	10	81	1
M2	9	13	75	4
M3	7	13	78	2
IJ1	8	12	73	8
IJ2	6	17	72	4

601