

The role of the public in changing norms: smoke-free beaches in Spain



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In Spain, a powerful campaign is paving the way to ban cigarette smoking on beaches. The motivations are not just for health, but also for the environment. Long after a cigarette has been extinguished, it continues to cause damage in the form of non-biodegradable cigarette butts – millions of kilograms of which are discarded every year.

In Spain, where almost every fifth adult and adolescent smokes – 18% of adults smoked tobacco in 2020 and 21% of adolescents aged 15–16 smoked cigarettes in 2019 – the health, economic and environmental impact of tobacco use is substantial. Spain is among a few countries in the WHO European Region which bans tobacco use in all indoor public places, and health campaigners and policy-makers are leading the way to extend smoke-free zones to outdoor spaces, including the country's sunny beaches.

The force behind this progress is a Spanish organization called [Nofumadores.org](#), which is composed of passionate people from every corner of Spain fighting for their right to live in a country free from tobacco and nicotine.

In 2018, [Nofumadores.org](#) launched a petition to lobby for smoke-free beaches across the country. Despite only sharing the petition organically through the organization's networks and on social media, it accumulated 107 000 signatures within 2 weeks. It became clear there was great support for this measure among the Spanish population.

No wonder – the benefits to beach smoking bans are extensive. They not only help decrease second-hand exposure to tobacco smoke, which causes more than 1.2 million premature deaths per year on a global scale, but also reduce litter, prevent harm to the environment caused by cigarette butts and improve amenities.

“We were congratulated on the proposal and told that this campaigning helps the Ministry when it comes to implementing these types of measures, since politicians need social support in order to change the laws,” explains Raquel Fernández Megina, President of [Nofumadores.org](https://www.nofumadores.org). “The main message we were given was: Make noise. Help us to help you.” As of March 2022, the petition had more than 331 000 signatures and is still growing.

Although the first beach in Spain declared itself smoke-free in 2006, only 91 – or 3% – of beaches were smoke-free by 2018. However, after campaigns across Spain by tobacco control advocates, this number grew to 525 by 2021, totaling 17.5%. For most of these beaches, the ban has thus far been predominantly educational, as there are no fines to secure it. But a new ecological law has just passed through Spain’s Congress and Senate, approved on 4 April. It includes a clause which would empower local councils to impose fines of up to €2000 for smoking on beaches. Although not a comprehensive ban that would prohibit it, this crucial step opens the door to local councils regulating seaside smoking. In the name of an ecological transition and a circular economy, the law is expected to enter into force by July 2022. This would strengthen smoke-free beaches through enforcement – effectively giving them definitive backing.

Banning smoking outdoors is becoming increasingly common around the world, thanks to the hard work of the tobacco control community. Recognizing the harm tobacco causes to the natural world and to other people, beach smoking bans are also gaining momentum in Italy, the United States of America and Australia.

“One of our goals is to amplify the number of outdoor smoke-free areas,” says Raquel. “The beaches were a good way to start because we knew we could count on the support of environmental movements, which were beginning to be quite strong, especially among young people. We also could count on the support of families tired of seeing their kids playing with butts that they encounter while playing with the beach sand.”

A strong motivation of [Nofumadores.org](https://www.nofumadores.org) is to ensure Big Tobacco is held to account, which has required extensive work engaging with lawmakers. The organization is pushing for a tobacco-free Spain by 2030 and following the ENDGAME roadmap, which includes a range

of measures to protect the right to health of Spanish citizens in line with the government's obligations under the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

Raquel was confident of support from local councils and the tourism industry. "There were already a bunch of smoke-free beach initiatives in Spain promoted by city halls who also realized smoke-free beaches would reduce their cleaning expenses," she explains. "Add to all that the fact that Spain has almost 8000 km of coastline with over 3000 beaches and lives off tourism – which is why its beaches must be high quality. We didn't think we'd encounter direct opposition from any specific person or organization to this measure, which we didn't!"

Raquel has a message for policy-makers and tobacco control advocates alike. "The tobacco industry has always had a license to poison the seas and burn the forests. The license has expired. Our politicians have a duty to put an end to this situation by passing laws that defend both the environment and public health in outdoor public spaces."

She is adamant that such measures are good for public health, and are popular. "The social demand for this type of measure is very high, so politicians do not have to be afraid of approving them, as they will always have broad public support," she explains. "In addition, the tobacco industry, who are most responsible for pollution, must be responsible for paying the costs derived from its cleaning. The tobacco industry cannot get away with simply putting a pictogram on its packages and holding the final consumer responsible for the contamination caused by their product."

"It's a legacy for current and future generations," says Raquel. "The awakening of society empowered to stop this horrible license to pollute. To prove that, with very few resources, you can achieve a lot if you believe in it and dedicate time, passion and effort."

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