

GREEN AUBG'S CAMPUS SUSTAINABILITY REPORT

SPRING 2025 EDITION





REDUCE

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REFUSE

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to their excellent book *Ecomedia: Key Issues*, editors Stephen Rust, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt write: “The idea of the commons is central to ecocritical work. It is based on the profound belief that we share the world in common with one another and with other non-human organisms and processes.” We couldn’t agree more, and it is this conviction that has, in large part, inspired us to carry out and continue work on sustainability issues at AUBG. Our beloved university has spent decades of inattention to such issues, but that was then. This is now.

This report is the first of its kind at AUBG, and we hope there will be many more to follow. It is our way of sharing important information with our community, but also our way of saying “Hey, look over here!” Because, after all, we have a not-so-hidden agenda. We seek to push sustainability to the forefront at AUBG, beyond talk and always toward action. There are myriad interlocking crises facing humanity – so many that it can feel insurmountable to even begin exploring solutions. However, we trust the science that says doing something to address these problems not only improves society but our mental health as well.

And so, this year we leapt into action – dozens of us students, faculty and staff – to do something. We held events, we crunched GHG data, we conducted a huge survey, we researched and proposed a plan for the university to follow, we promoted the [Sustainability Studies Minor](#) and the [Sustainability Club](#), and we got our hands dirty and picked through our campus trash. What follows is a sampling of some key data we crunched from some of these activities.

We are grateful to all the volunteers and partners who pitched in this year. We are confident the momentum will continue next academic year and beyond. In the meantime, we will continue the collective organizing needed to ensure our commons is healthy, vibrant and sustainable, for today and long into the future.

AWARENESS AT AUBG

Change starts with awareness, which hopefully leads to individual and collective action. With this in mind, Green AUBG conducted a campus-wide survey in the Fall of 2025 - a comprehensive online survey* that 720 students, faculty and staff filled out.

A big part of the survey was assessing our community's knowledge and awareness of sustainability topics and issues - on campus and beyond. In this section, we share some of our key findings, ranging from climate concern to climate denial to commonly held recycling myths.

*We also printed out a handful of paper versions of the survey in Bulgarian for some employees.

A MINORITY OF DOUBTERS

While the scientific consensus on climate change is clear, this belief doesn't seem to be universal, even at AUBG.

Of all respondents, 17 people (~ 2.4%) shared that they do not believe in human-caused climate change.

We also explored the distribution of majors among 13 students*:

- Business Administration – 9
- Economics – 4
- Journalism, Media, and Communication – 3
- Political Science – 3
- Computer Science – 2

*These numbers do not account for overlapping double majors.

CLIMATE OF DOUBT?

Climate denial by position at the university:



3
staff members ~ 3.1%



1
faculty member ~ 2.3%



13
students ~ 2.2%

RECYCLING MYTHS AT AUBG

While many in our community express concern for the environment, everyday misunderstandings continue to shape our behaviour – especially when it comes to recycling. (Percentages rounded)

Let's bust some of the major recycling myths in the AUBG Community:

66%

believe that plastic tableware is recyclable
(too lightweight & often contaminated)



83%

believe that plastic bottles are recyclable
(recycled rarely & mostly end up in landfill)



57%

believe that coffee cups are recyclable
(most are lined with plastic, and therefore are landfill-bound)



14%

believe that styrofoam is recyclable
(the worst for the environment - non-biodegradable and non-recyclable)



THE INFORMATION GAP

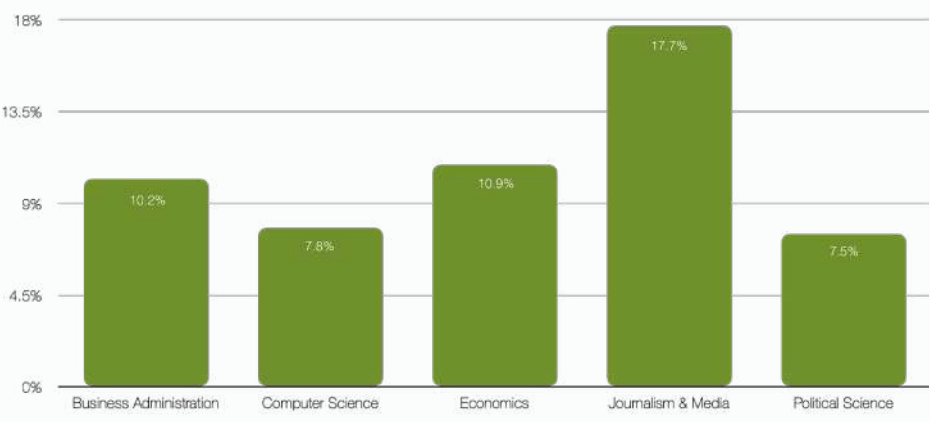
Sustainability is filled with terms we hear often, but don't always fully understand. This is why we included key concepts like **zero waste** and **carbon neutrality** in our survey, in order to get a sense of how familiar the AUBG community is with the language of sustainability.

When asked what **zero waste** means, responses ranged from detailed definitions to complete guesses. While many people understood it as a lifestyle and global system that minimizes waste, others thought it was simply about reusing and recycling.

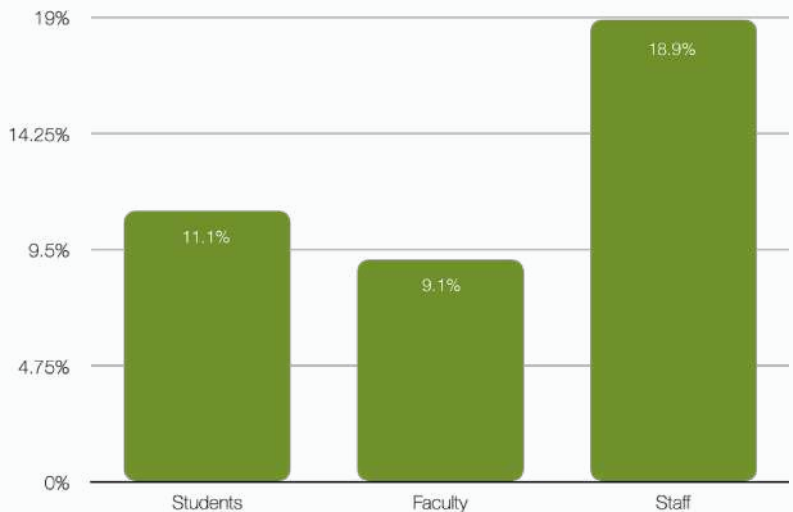
The Zero Waste International Alliance defines the concept as “the conservation of all resources by means of responsible production, consumption, reuse, and recovery of products, packaging, and materials without burning and with no discharges to land, water, or air that threaten the environment or human health.”

Perhaps more surprising was the number of people who had never heard of **carbon neutrality** - a concept that has become central to climate change mitigation globally. According to our survey, 12% of the AUBG community is unfamiliar with it.

By major:



By position:



According to the European Parliament, carbon neutrality means balancing the amount of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere with the amount removed or offset. A person, organization, or country is considered carbon neutral when its net carbon emissions are zero - usually through a combination of reducing emissions and investing in things like renewable energy or reforestation.

Please see (8) in the resource section at the end of the report for further reading.

17.9% of the community believes plastic is compostable.

IS SUSTAINABILITY EXPENSIVE?

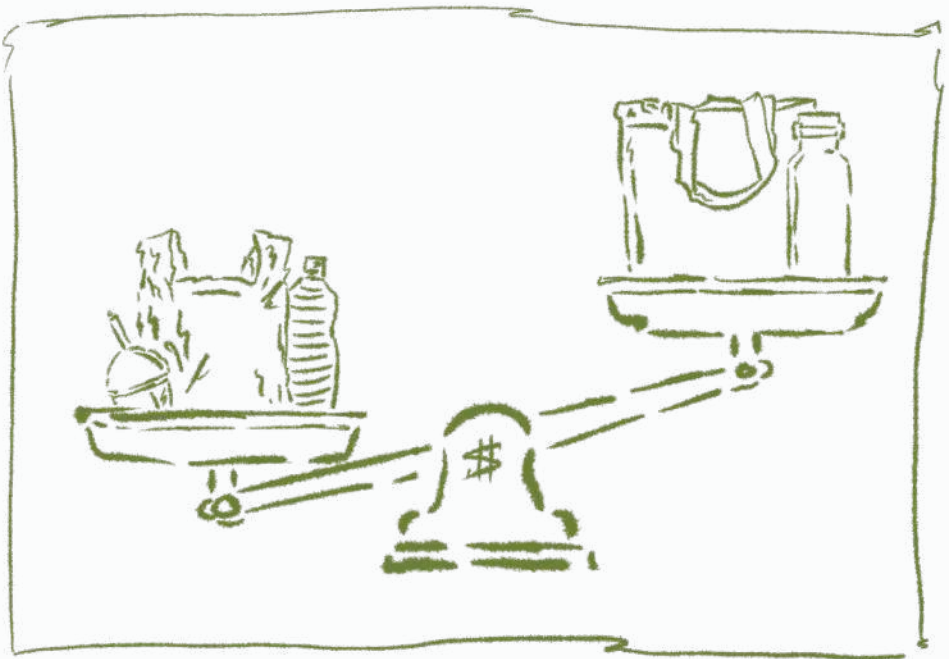
8.1% of respondents associate sustainability with higher prices for consumers. While it’s true that some sustainable choices can be more expensive - like switching to an organic diet or opting for eco-friendly products - sustainability doesn’t always have to come with a higher price tag. There are simple and cost-free ways to make more sustainable choices, like reducing waste, using less energy, and choosing reusable items.

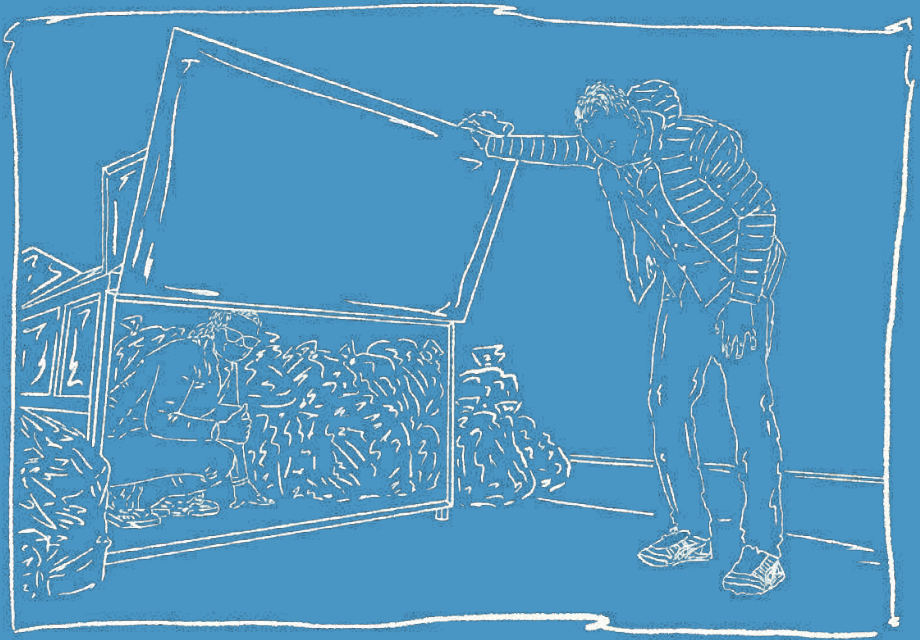
Remember that sustainability is complex, intersectional and highly dependent on socio-economic privilege - a sustainable lifestyle looks different for everyone! But also remember that small changes, when enacted by many, can make a big impact without breaking the bank.

TOP 5 GREEN HABITS ON CAMPUS

1. Walking, or using sustainable transport
2. Using reusable bags
3. Using reusable bottles and mugs
4. Turning off the lights when not in use
5. Making eco-conscious decisions when buying products

Moreover, nearly 58% of the AUBG community supports the creation of a Sustainability Office at the university. This signals a clear desire for more long-term, institution-driven sustainability efforts, beyond individual action!





REUSE

PROGRESS ON CAMPUS

It's been a busy academic year for sustainability at AUBG. With so many exciting developments, initiatives and events, we created [Green AUBG](#) to serve as a campus grassroots umbrella where we can group various initiatives, actions, events and plans. We are delighted to share some major highlights below that show progress on campus is moving along, sometimes at bureaucratic levels and at other times at break-neck speed.

This list isn't exhaustive, and there is plenty more to come, but here are the *Top Green Hits* for AY 24-25.

- A new [Sustainability Studies Minor](#) was launched, which allows students to study everything from Environmental Ethics to Ecomedia and receive a Minor accreditation for doing so.
- The President's Office inaugurated a new one-year position—the [Sustainability Fellow](#) — with Aelita Khusnutdinova taking on the role of coordinating multiple sustainability efforts on campus.
- In February '25 AUBG conducted its first [Pilot Waste Audit](#), which you can read about in the next section. Spoiler alert: We make a lot of waste!
- The Chair of the Sustainability Committee (Prof. Ezra Winton), with crucial help from the Sustainability Fellow, proposed a new research lab on campus. We are thrilled to say the administration liked the idea and the [Sustainability Education Action Lab \(SEAL\)](#) is in development! To learn more and keep up to date on SEAL grants and other announcements, join our newsletter, and follow us on IG (info at the end of the report).
- We also proposed a new experiential green learning space on campus - the [Community Garden](#), as well as a [Campus Sustainability Plan](#) for AUBG. Both are currently being (seriously) considered by the administration.
- We've also made progress in bringing AUBG up to speed with Recycling and Biowaste Processing on Campus. We plan to launch a [Bio-Waste and Recycling Program](#) with new bins and a new chapter in our [Waste Education Campaign](#). Stay tuned and get ready to throw that banana peel in the right bin!

PILOT WASTE AUDIT



HOW WE CAME TO KNOW OUR WASTE

We blame Geneva Guerin. Geneva is an old friend of Professor Winton's and a brilliant environmental scientist and sustainability consultant. In September '25 we invited Geneva to campus for two events - a GHG Carbon Calculator Workshop and a talk about Campus Sustainability Assessments (CSA). Geneva inspired us to take the initial steps in conducting AUBG's first-ever CSA, and advised us to begin with a Pilot Waste Audit.

A campus Waste Audit measures all the garbage our community produces in one time frame. We decided to take baby steps and chose one single day. A small army of brave and enthusiastic students (joined by some staff and faculty) collected and saved up all the waste from one typical AUBG day. Then, on the next day the intrepid volunteers assembled on the ABF lawn to open up a sampling of the 192 bags and measure, yes measure, the garbage. We did this by separating waste into different "waste streams" (single-use plastics, paper cups, organic material, paper, etc). It was an enlightening experience, to say the least, and we could not have done it without the invaluable assistance from [Za Zemiata \(For the Earth\)](#), an environmental NGO based in Sofia. Some of their team members came to AUBG for the day and showed us the ropes. We were also assisted by the Municipality of Blagoevgrad, led by Natalia Dimitrova, who arrived for the waste sorting event with a dozen local high school students (and who also bravely jumped into the garbage fray).

Below, we share some of our key findings from AUBG's first, but not last, Waste Audit - the first step in the long and elucidating process of measuring AUBG's environmental impact. Because you can't reduce it if you don't measure it!

METHODOLOGY

On February 26 and the morning of February 27, volunteers collected and tagged waste from the entire campus, marking different buildings with appropriate colour-coded tags. The waste was then placed in containers provided by the Blagoevgrad Municipality.

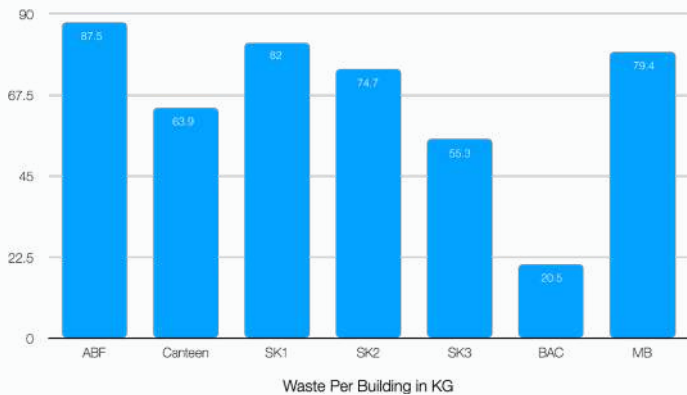
Then, the audit began with counting the total number of trash bags and measuring the weight of each bag. A sample of bags was selected from each building. Volunteers sorted through the sampled bags and categorized the waste into the following groups:

- Food Waste, Compostable Paper and Cardboard Packaging
- Recyclable Paper and Cardboard
- Plastic Bottles
- Metal Cans
- Tetra Paks
- Plastic Packaging (excluding plastic bottles which were counted separately)
- Paper Cups with Plastic Lining
- Other Waste

Volunteers then weighed each category separately, recorded the data in kilograms for weight measurements and counted the number of packaging items for specific categories. We calculated that the waste sorted accounted for 35% of the total daily waste, and based on that, were able to infer the following key findings.

KEY FINDINGS

From the data, we found that over the eight months that the campus is full of students, staff and faculty, [AUBG produces over 85 tonnes](#) of garbage. This is no small number - let's see how we can break this down.



462

kilograms of waste produced by the AUBG Community every day

55

kilograms of waste produced by one person in AUBG every year

66%

of AUBG's Waste can be recycled or composted

42%

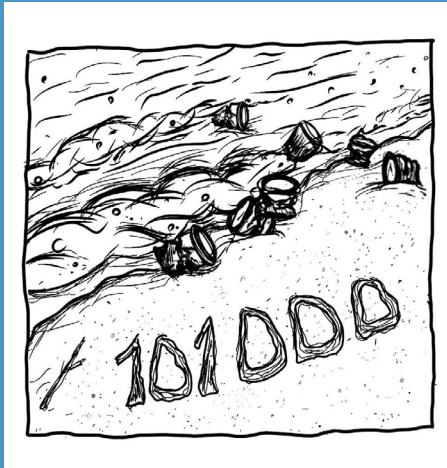
of AUBG's Waste is paper packaging, compostable cardboard & food waste

34%

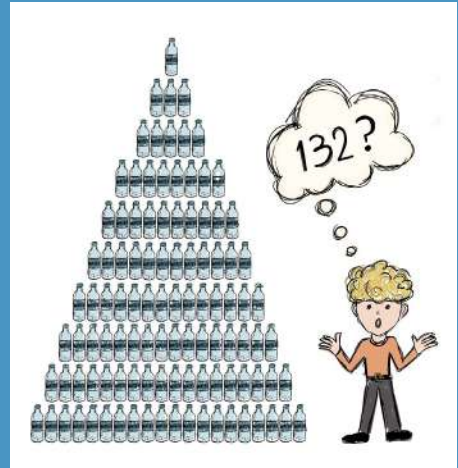
will end up in the landfill

30+

tonnes every year



(average number of coffee cups used per semester)



(average number of plastic bottles used per person per semester)

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

AUBG can do much better. The good news is, most of the community agrees and supports efforts toward improvement.

88%

think it's important to offer sustainability-related courses

91%

think it's important to conduct sustainability-related research

95%

think it's important for AUBG to operate sustainably

94%

think it's important to have a comprehensive sustainability policy

WHAT DOES THE COMMUNITY REALLY WANT?

After asking the AUBG community what they wish the university would do more of when it comes to sustainability, we've put together the five most common suggestions:

1. No more plastic straws on campus! There are several affordable, more sustainable options, and it's time we started using them.
2. Recycling. This was a big one. From having more and better labelled bins on campus to raising awareness and educating ourselves, there's a lot more work to be done.
3. Introducing more Sustainability Courses. The Sustainability Minor is a step in the right direction, but with a field as complex and comprehensive as Sustainability, there's always room for a set of both nuanced and focussed courses, including the integration of sustainability in non-sustainable centred courses. It's time we realize the intersectionality of sustainability - and start including it in every major at AUBG.
4. More water dispensers! Sales data from the cafes on campus shows that the number of plastic water bottles sold has gone down since the introduction of more water dispensers on campus - so we know it works. Now, we need to bring those numbers down even more.

SURVEY COMMENTS

"Stop partnering with companies that are known mass polluters (Coca-Cola, Nestle)!"

"Give more information about how sustainable we currently are and set an objective for the future. AUBG should share these stats and encourage the community to improve. With this, comes the need to measure sustainability factors in some way."

GREEN AUBG'S TOP 5 SUSTAINABILITY OBJECTIVES

1. Eliminate single-use plastics on campus.
2. Work towards becoming a zero-waste campus.
3. Transition the campus from fossil fuels to clean, renewable energy sources.
4. Create a comprehensive and well-communicated sustainable policy for AUBG, involving the whole community, from students, to faculty, to staff, to board members.
5. Create a Green Living Guide for the campus - this will help bridge any information gaps and give everyone a basic sustainability framework they can incorporate into their daily lives.

CONCLUSION

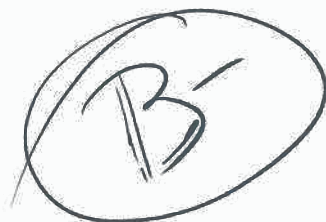
As an educational institution and community, it is our responsibility to strive to be part of the solution, not the problem. While awareness at AUBG is growing, it is only the beginning, and we have a lot of work to do. With the information that the Sustainability Survey and Pilot Waste Audit have provided us with, it is time to start building behaviors, programs and policies that contribute to meaningful change.

Now, we're off to a good (albeit late) start. The AUBG community wants a more sustainable campus - not just in theory, but in practice. The past year has already seen encouraging first steps: a new Sustainability Minor, our first campus Waste Audit, the creation of a Sustainability Fellow position, and so on. These efforts reflect a growing commitment, but not much will change until we, as a community, actively engage in and push for change.

According to the survey, the community, on average, grades AUBG a **B-*** for sustainability. We're not so sure. Green AUBG and the Sustainability Committee see this as a likely example of grade inflation, a reflection of optimism rather than accuracy. We take this not as a reason to celebrate, but as a reminder that real transformation requires a critical look at where we are, not just where we hope to be.

Let's move from awareness to impact. Let's embed sustainability into the daily life of our campus - not just as a talking point, but as a shared responsibility. We have the information. We have the data. We have a list of proposals. And we have the support of the community. It's time for AUBG to take action.

*8.2/12



RESOURCES & FURTHER READING

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3. "European Green Deal ," Council of the European Union, December 3, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/green-deal/>.
4. "The 17 Goals ," United Nations, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.
5. "The next Phase of Our Journey: Climate Action Plan 2025," Vassar, accessed January 6, 2025, [https://www.vassar.edu/sustainability/climate-action/next-phase-our-journey-climate-action-plan-2025#:~:text=Vassar's%20first%20Climate%20Action%20Plan,Climate%20Action%20Plan%20\(PDF\)](https://www.vassar.edu/sustainability/climate-action/next-phase-our-journey-climate-action-plan-2025#:~:text=Vassar's%20first%20Climate%20Action%20Plan,Climate%20Action%20Plan%20(PDF)).
6. The Zero Waste International Alliance - (<https://zwia.org/zero-waste-definition/>)
7. United Nations. (n.d.). Net Zero Coalition | United Nations <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/net-zero-coalition>
8. What is carbon neutrality and how can it be achieved by 2050? | Topics | European Parliament. (2019, March 10). Topics | European Parliament. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20190926STO62270/what-is-carbon-neutrality-and-how-can-it-be-achieved-by-2050#:~:text=Carbon%20neutrality%20means%20having%20a,is%20known%20as%20carbon%20sequestration>
9. "What Is Sustainability?," The Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System, June 18, 2024, <https://stars.aashe.org/resources-support/help-center/the-basics/what-is-sustainability/>.
10. Ecomedia: Key Issues. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt (eds.), Routledge, 2016.

STAY IN TOUCH

If you or someone you know would like to receive the Green AUBG newsletter, have them email sustainability@aubg.edu.

Follow us on Instagram [@green_aubg](#) for updates.

CREDITS

It takes a village, or in this case a campus, to move toward sustainability.

Aelita Khusnutdinova (data crunching & writing) is AUBG alumna and Presidential Fellow for Sustainability specializing in data analysis and writing; she has led numerous environmental initiatives and campaigns on and off campus.

Aprajita Jayaram (research & writing) is a senior majoring in Political Science and Environmental Policy, who has taken part in various conservation initiatives and research projects.

Blagoevgrad Municipality (material support) is the local government authority collaborating on environmental and community-focused projects in the city of Blagoevgrad.

Carter Mandrick (survey interpretation) is a professor at AUBG who gave invaluable data analysis guidance for this report, and is known for his expertise in marketing and quantitative research.

Ezra Winton (research & writing) is a professor at AUBG and a curator, writer and media scholar known for his work on media ethics, activism, documentary and soon ecology.

Velichko Dimitrov (illustrations, page 15) is a talented first-year AUBG student who contributed two original graphic illustrations to support the visual communication of the report.

Yenlik O'Neill (design & layout) is a marketing content creation specialist and an adjunct professor at AUBG with a creative approach to visual storytelling and communication.

Za Zemiata (Pilot Waste Audit support) is a Bulgarian environmental NGO providing expert guidance on waste audits and sustainable systems transformation.

Thank you also to the Provost's Office for continued support!

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