



The Eight Myths of Recycling

By Daniel Benjamin

Garbage is the unavoidable by-product of production and consumption. There are three ways to deal with it, all known and used since antiquity: dumping, burning, and recycling. For thousands of years it was commonplace to dump rubbish on site—on the floor, or out the window. Scavenging domestic animals, chiefly pigs and dogs, consumed the edible parts, and poor people salvaged what they could. The rest was covered and built upon.

Eventually, humans began to use more elaborate methods of dealing with their rubbish. The first modern incinerator (called a “destructor”) went into operation in Nottingham, England in 1874. After World War II, landfills became the accepted means of dealing with trash. The modern era of the recycling craze can be traced to 1987, when the garbage barge *Mobro 4000* had to spend two months touring the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico before it found a home for its load. The Environmental Defense Fund, the National Solid Waste Management Association (whose members were anxious to line up new customers for their expanding landfill capacity), the press, and finally the Environmental Protection Agency, spun the story of a garbage crisis out of control. By 1995, the majority of Americans thought trash was our number one environmental problem—with 77 percent reporting that increased recycling of household rubbish was the solution. Yet these claims and fears were based

on errors and misinformation, which I have compiled into the Eight Great Myths of Recycling.

Myth 1: Our Garbage Will Bury Us

Fact: Even though the United States is larger, more affluent, and producing more garbage, it now has more landfill capacity than ever before. The erroneous opposite impression comes from old studies that counted the number of landfills (which has declined) rather than landfill capacity (which has grown). There are a few places, like New Jersey, where capacity has shrunk. But the uneven distribution of landfill space is no more important than the uneven distribution of automobile manufacturing. Perhaps the most important fact is this: If we permitted our rubbish to grow to the height of New York City’s famous Fresh Kills landfill (225 feet), a site only about 10 miles on a side could hold *all of America’s garbage for the next century.*

Myth 2: Our Garbage Will Poison Us

Fact: Almost anything can pose a theoretical threat, but evidence of actual harm from landfills is almost non-existent, as the Environmental Protection Agency itself acknowledges. The EPA has concluded that landfills constructed according to agency regulations can be expected to cause a total of 5.7 cancer-related deaths over the next 300 years. It isn’t household waste, but improperly or illegally dumped industrial wastes that can be harmful. Household recycling programs have no effect on those wastes, a fact ignored by messianic proponents of recycling.

Myth 3: Our Packaging Is Immoral

Fact: Many people argue that the best

way to “save landfill space” is to reduce the amount of packaging Americans use, via mandatory controls. But packaging can actually *reduce* total garbage produced and total resources used. The average American family generates fully one third less trash than does the average Mexican household. The reason is that our intensive use of packaging yields less spoilage and breakage, thereby saving resources, and producing, on balance, less total rubbish. Careful packaging also reduces food poisoning and other health problems.

Over the past 25 years, market incentives have already reduced the weights of individual packages by 30 to 70 percent. An average aluminum can weighed nearly 21 grams in 1972; in 2002, that same can weighs in at under 14 grams. A plastic grocery sack was 2.3 mils thick in 1976; by 2001, it was a mere 0.7 mils.

By contrast, the environmentally sensitive *New York Times* has been growing. A year’s worth of the newspaper now weighs 520 pounds and occupies more than 40 cubic feet in a landfill. This is equivalent in weight to 17,180 aluminum cans—nearly a century’s worth of beer and soft drink consumption by one person. Clearly, people anxious to heal Mother Earth must forego the *Times!*

Myth 4: We Must Achieve “Trash Independence”

Fact: Garbage has become an interstate business, with 47 states exporting the stuff and 45 importing it. Environmentalists contend that each state should dispose within its borders all the trash produced within its borders. But why?

Transporting garbage across an arbitrary legal boundary has no effect on the environmental impact of the disposal of that material. Moving a ton of trash is no more hazardous than moving a ton of any other commodity.

Myth 5: We're Squandering Irreplaceable Resources

Fact: Thanks to numerous innovations, we now produce about twice as much output per unit of energy as we did 50 years ago, and five times as much as we did 200 years ago. Automobiles use only half as much metal as in 1970, and one optical fiber carries the same number of calls as 625 copper wires did 20 years ago. Bridges are built with less steel, because steel is stronger and engineering is improved. Automobile and truck engines consume less fuel per unit of work performed, and produce fewer emissions.

To address the issue of paper, the most-promoted form of recycling: The amount of new growth that occurs each year in forests is more than 20 times the number of trees consumed by the world each year for wood and paper. Where loss of forest land is taking place, as in tropical rain forests, it can be traced directly to a lack of private property rights. Governments have used forests, especially the valuable tropical ones, as an easy way to raise quick cash. Wherever private property rights to forests are well-defined and enforced, forests are either stable or growing. More recycling of paper or cardboard would not eliminate tropical forest losses.

Myth 6: Recycling Always Protects the Environment

Fact: Recycling is a manufacturing process, and therefore it too has environmental impact. The U.S. Office of Technology Assessment says that it is "not clear whether secondary manufacturing [i.e., recycling] produces less pollution per ton of material processed than primary manufacturing." Recycling merely changes the nature of pollution—sometimes decreasing it, and sometimes increasing it.

This effect is particularly apparent in

the case of curbside recycling, which is mandated or strongly encouraged by governments in many communities around the country. Curbside recycling requires that more trucks be used to collect the same amount of waste materials. Instead of one truck picking up 40 pounds of garbage, one will pick up four pounds of recyclables and a second will collect 36 pounds of rubbish.

Los Angeles has estimated that due to curbside recycling, its fleet of trucks is twice as large as it otherwise would be—800 vs. 400 trucks. This means more iron ore and coal mining, more steel and rubber manufacturing, more petroleum extracted and refined for fuel—and of course all that extra air pollution in the Los Angeles basin as the 400 added trucks cruise the streets.

Myth 7: Recycling Saves Resources

Fact: Using less of one resource usually means using more of another. Curbside recycling is substantially more costly and uses far more resources than a program in which disposal is combined with a voluntary drop-off/buy-back option. The reason: Curbside recycling of household rubbish uses huge amounts of capital and labor per pound of material recycled. Overall, curbside recycling costs between 35 and 55 percent more than simply disposing of the item. It typically wastes resources.

In the ordinary course of daily living, we already reuse most higher value items. The only things that intentionally end up in the trash are both low in value and costly to reuse or recycle. Yet these are the items that municipal recycling programs are targeting—the very things that consumers have already decided are too worthless or costly to deal with further. All of the profitable, socially productive opportunities for recycling were long ago co-opted by the private sector, because they pay back. The bulk of all curbside recycling programs simply waste resources.

Myth 8: Without Forced Mandates, There Wouldn't Be Any Recycling

Fact: Long before state or local governments had even contemplated the word recycling, the makers of steel, aluminum, and thousands of other products were recycling manufacturing scraps. Some operated post-consumer drop-off centers.

As for the claim that the private sector promotes premature or excessive disposal, this ignores an enormous body of evidence to the contrary. Firms only survive in the marketplace if they take into account all costs. Fifty years ago, when labor was cheap compared to materials, goods were built to be repaired, so that the expensive materials could be used for a longer period of time. As the price of labor has risen and the cost of materials has fallen, manufacturers have responded by building items to be used until they break, and then discarded. There is no bias against recycling; there is merely a market-driven effort to conserve the most valuable resources.

Informed, voluntary recycling conserves resources and raises our wealth, enabling us to achieve valued ends that would otherwise be impossible. *Mandatory* programs, however, in which people are directly or indirectly compelled to do what they know is not sensible, routinely make society worse off. Such programs force people to squander valuable resources in a quixotic quest to save what they would sensibly discard.

Except in a few rare cases, the free market is eminently capable of providing both disposal and recycling in an amount and mix that creates the greatest wealth for society. This makes possible the widest and most satisfying range of human endeavors. Simply put, market prices are sufficient to induce the trashman to come, and to make his burden bearable, and neither he nor we can hope for any better than that.

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