

RECYCLING

Think about a world with no rubbish. Food goes back onto the land and helps to grow more food. Old vegetable oil makes the buses run, and two old bicycles make one new bicycle. When you don't want something, you give it to somebody else.

Now think about a world full of rubbish. Animals and fish eat our plastic bags and die. Ships full of toxic waste go from country to country, but nobody wants them. We think that we throw things away – but there are fewer and fewer places to put the rubbish.

Decide to recycle, and you can help to make a cleaner, more pleasant world. Just turn the page, and you can learn how to start saving electricity, trees, the environment – and money!

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1 The rubbish problem

What is rubbish and what happens to it? It is not something that people like to think about too often. When we throw away our rubbish, we usually forget about it. Somebody takes it away and it is not our problem any more. Or is it?

What happens to the rubbish that everyone throws away every week? Where does it go? Why should people recycle rubbish? Why not just put it into the bin?

The fact is that there is not enough room for everybody's rubbish any more. A lot of rubbish goes into big holes in the ground called landfill sites, but after a time these fill up. Finding new landfill sites is a problem nearly everywhere in the world.

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So why is this happening? How much rubbish do we throw away? Here are some facts about rubbish.

- 8 billion plastic bags are used in the UK each year, and most of them are only used once and then thrown away. That is 135 bags for each person in a year.
- In Hong Kong customers use 6.7 million bags a year – 1,294 plastic bags for each person.
- In Greece plastic from landfill sites gets into the sea and kills 10,000 fish each day.
- In South Africa the wind has blown thousands of plastic bags into the trees, and people now call plastic bags ‘the new South African flower’.
- In the UK 1.5 million computers are put into landfill sites each year.
- Japan has over 600 landfill sites but many of them are nearly full.
- During the Christmas holidays of 2005, people in UK homes put 550 million glass bottles into their rubbish bins.
- In the USA each person throws away about 2 kilos of rubbish a day.

So why don't we just burn our rubbish? Burning rubbish sounds like a good idea but there are problems. If you burn rubbish, it can make unpleasant smoke which is bad for people's health. People who live near the fires can become very ill, so burning rubbish is not the best answer.

How do you throw away a television or a battery or an old car? This kind of rubbish is called toxic waste. It contains things – perhaps metals or chemicals – that can be dangerous for people and animals. They can also be very bad for the land, the rivers, and the sea. Most countries in the world have laws about toxic waste. Usually these laws say that

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you have to take toxic waste to a special place where the dangerous things can be removed safely. The problem is that this process is very expensive and difficult.

In the past, some countries decided to give the problem to someone else. Rich countries put their toxic waste into old ships and paid poorer countries to take it. But after a time the poorer countries began to say no to this dangerous rubbish. Toxic ships began to sail around the world. They tried to stop at one country after another but nobody wanted them.

So every day all over the world the problem of rubbish gets bigger. For rich countries and for poor countries it is a terrible problem.

Has anybody got an answer? There are some countries in the world that do not make very much rubbish. There are people in some parts of Mexico who do not have a word for 'rubbish' in their language. Why not? The reason is that they do not have any rubbish. They do not know what rubbish is. For them, everything is useful, and everything can be used more than once. They recycle everything. And this is not a new idea. The story of recycling began a long time ago.

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2 5,000 years of rubbish and recycling

In the earliest times there were no towns. People lived in small groups and often moved from place to place while they looked for wild animals that they could kill and eat. They did not have much rubbish, only ash from their fires and bits of old food. All of this was put into the ground and it probably helped their vegetables to grow better.

The problem of waste began when people started to live in towns. The earliest landfill sites were found in Knossos,

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the capital of Crete, and these were probably made in about 3000 BC. These very old sites in Crete are different from the landfill sites of today and contain mostly ash, wood, and pieces of plates and bowls.

Over 2,500 years ago the government of Athens said they did not want a landfill site in the city. They told the people of Athens that they had to take all their rubbish outside the city walls, about two kilometres outside Athens. This is the first story about the problem of waste that we know of.

It is a problem that began a very long time ago, but even then people were finding answers. In China in 2000 BC, for example, people composted their rubbish. This means that they put all their bits of old vegetables and fruit in one place outside and left it there. After a few months it changed into a rich brown material called compost, which is very good for plants. They used this compost to grow young plants in the garden. Many gardeners today still like to make compost and use it in their gardens. It is an old idea but a good one! Maybe composting is the first example of recycling.

But it is not worth making compost if you do not have a garden. In England people who lived in towns just used to throw their rubbish outside the door. Sometimes there was a lot of rubbish outside the houses and it became difficult to walk along the streets. The streets also smelt very bad. In 1297 the government said they would punish people who left rubbish in front of their houses, but nobody cared about this. They burnt some of their rubbish on the fires inside their houses, but they continued to throw the rest outside onto the streets.

In London the streets became very dirty and sometimes it was impossible to walk in them. When people went outside they wore high shoes made of wood to try to keep their feet

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clean. Sometimes the rubbish was taken out of London and thrown away in the country. At last in 1354 the government began to employ special workers to take the rubbish away.

In Germany at the same time a clever idea helped to get rubbish out of the cities. People came to the towns with carts full of fruit and vegetables. They sold the food in the markets and went home in the evening with empty carts. A new law said that people must leave at the end of the day with their carts full of rubbish to carry away to the country. Nobody could leave with an empty cart.

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