

Recycling is great, but reduction is the key

“In (our) culture, a sense of ‘enoughness’ is a sign of mental aberration. A need for ‘moreness’ is considered normal. What a pathetic way to go through life, always grasping, always greedy – always discontented with the self.” Joan Chittister

“Men have become the tools of their tools.” Henry David Thoreau

“Simplify, simplify, simplify”, said H.D. Thoreau in 1854 (*Walden, or Life in the Woods*). And the shelves of books devoted to “decluttering” would seem to agree that we need this advice even more today, than we did 150 years ago.

The 20th century culture of consumption leads to great economic and environmental costs. For example, the annual cost of pollution and ecosystem degradation in China is at least equivalent to 15% of its GDP.

People in industrial countries account for about 20% of world population, yet consume 86% of its aluminium, 81% of its paper, 80% of its iron and steel, and 76% of its timber. The average US citizen accounts for the use of 540 tons of construction materials, 18 tons of paper, 23 tons of wood, 16 tons of metals and 32 tons of organic chemicals in the course of his lifetime.

Materials use has grown far faster than population: in the US, total consumption of virgin raw materials was 17 times greater in 1989 than it was in 1900, compared with a threefold increase in population.¹

In order to reduce the flow of materials for consumption, it has been said that a transition as profound as that from the Stone to the Bronze Age must be brought about. Such a transition would entail a change of mentality on the part of industry

and individuals alike, from consumption of virgin raw materials and discarding the waste, to taking into account the need for environmentally efficient materials use.

It is interesting that people on high incomes living in cities have much higher impacts than everyone else. The benefit of lower petrol consumption is far

outweighed by strong consumer spending on everything else.²

In the Sydney region, consumption of food accounts for 43% of total consumption and is by far the biggest contributor to total consumption. But up to a third of food is thrown away and at least half of this food could have been eaten if it was managed better.

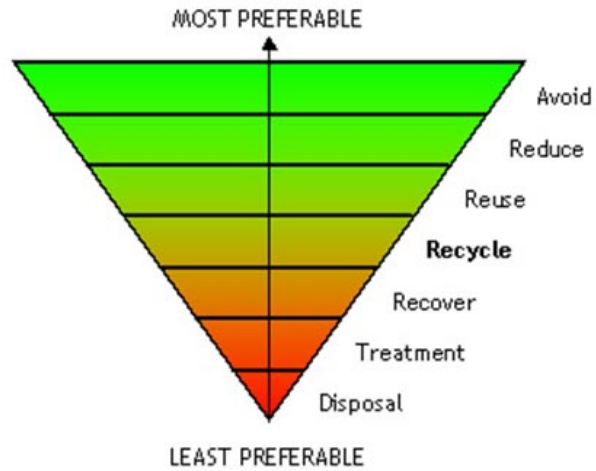
The second biggest contribution to total consumption is “other goods” – which is all the “stuff” we buy. An Australia Institute study found that we waste \$10.8 billion a year on things that we rarely or never use. Before you buy something new ask yourself: Do I need it? Can I fix it? Can I borrow/hire it? Can I buy it second hand? Is the thing I am buying made to last? Is it made of recycled materials (this reduces the amount of raw materials and energy needed to make the product).



Making do with less

Waste avoidance is the most important element of the Waste Hierarchy and also the one which presents the toughest challenges.

Unfortunately, in spite of growing awareness in the community about the need to reduce waste, waste generation rates have continued to rise in line with growth in our standard of living. A recent study of attitudes to wasteful consumption made the disturbing finding that young people are both more likely to engage in wasteful consumption and less likely to feel guilty about such behaviour.^{3,4}



Note: the principle of the waste hierarchy is to list, in descending order, a range of actions to deal with waste. Other interpretations of this hierarchy may use different terms to describe the same pathway and may invert the pyramid.

When you avoid making garbage in the first place, you don't have to worry about disposing of waste or recycling it later. Changing your habits is the key — think about ways you can reduce your waste when you shop, work and play. There's a ton of ways for you to reduce waste, save yourself some time and money, and be good to the Earth at the same time.

As well as learning what can be recycled, where to recycle stuff, and what the recycling process entails, it is important to take a step backwards and look at your shopping patterns and examine the types of products and their packaging that is coming into your home.

Examples of avoidance techniques include:

Considerations for individuals

- Buying goods in bulk;
- Reconsidering superfluous purchases;
- Purchasing products in materials/packaging that is readily recycled;
- Use of alternatives, e.g. landscaping that creates mulched gardens in place of lawns; and
- Use of composting and vermiculture practices

Consideration for industry

- Change in product design to reduce materials consumption;
- Using crates instead of pallets to avoid the need for shrink wrap;
- Incorporate Eco-Design technology into production processes;
- Adoption of [Cleaner Production](#) practices that ensure avoidance through efficiency measures; and
- Conduct regular audits and monitoring of waste reduction/resource recovery practices.

Considerations for Local Government

- Encourage community 'avoidance' activities, e.g. promote competitions rewarding initiative in this area of resource recovery;
- Lead by example, e.g. display mulched gardens throughout the municipality; and
- Provide facilities and infrastructure to assist industry, business and the community to undertake resource recovery practices, e.g. kerbside recycling and resource exchange registers.

Smart Shopping

You can reduce the amount of garbage you produce by being a smart shopper. Here are some ideas:

- Avoid disposable products
- Buy durable products
- Before you buy consider borrowing, hiring, making do with something else.
- Choose products with minimal or no packaging
- Buy in bulk - to reduce the amount of packaging and to save money
- Buy products, which are available in refillable or reusable packs
- Use your own shopping bags or a cardboard box instead of plastic bags
- Buy products packaged in material that can be recycled
- Shop where containers can be refilled or returned
- If your favourite products do not meet your expectations, write to the manufacturers and tell them why, or look for alternative products.



Freecycle

The Freecycle Network™ is made up of 4,798 groups with 7,211,000 members across the globe. It's a grassroots and entirely nonprofit movement of people who are giving (& getting) stuff for free in their own towns. It's all about reuse and keeping good stuff out of landfills. Each local group is moderated by a local volunteer. Membership is free.⁵

Be a Refuser!

It is only in the last 10 – 15 years that shop-bought products, mainly food, come neatly sorted in plastic trays, draped in clingfilm, or covered in and protected by plastic wrap of some sort. Food bought directly from farms or at the roadside can be bought without any wrapping; why not the same way at the supermarket, or at a small local grocery store? Start taking a stand against packaging: always be polite yet firm, and explain to the supermarket staff that the less packaging waste their store produces, the less we put into landfill, and the less pollution our environment suffers. Prepare yourself with facts, and join the anti-packaging revolution.

Cardboard.

Keep cardboard boxes in good condition, and keep reusing them instead of collecting new ones.

Donate Materials to Reusers.

Look around your local area for any small-scale enterprise that is reusing old materials to create new objects, be they functional, or art pieces. There might be an artist working nearby who always needs newspapers, or a small company that recycles rubber. A local school in your area might well need paper, plastic sheets, or old paint or similar materials.

Bicycles keep rolling

Bicycle Recycling Network assists by diverting bicycles to various community groups in Sydney where they are refurbished and put back into the community. From bike art, wheelchairs for amputee victims, youth programs, preservation of historical bikes, bike fleets to bicycles being sent to third world countries the alternatives are varied.

Recycling/reprocessing

Paper and cardboard, aluminium cans and glass (only clean bottles or jars) are not the only types of materials that can be recycled. Other commonly recyclable items include:

- Scrap metals, including white goods
- Sump oil
- Clean cardboard
- All rigid plastic bottles and containers, plastic codes numbered 1-7
- Car batteries
- Gas bottles

Contact your local council to find out what is available in your area. Also Planet Ark's "Recycling Near You" website⁶ has information for recycling of many other items.

Reduce, and Rejuvenate

The regular turnover of rubbish in our houses is a drag. It creates mess, constant cleaning, expense, and of course, is bad for the environment. Whether we suffer from the consequences of environmental pollution now or in the longer term, us or our children and grandchildren, will at some stage see the effects of such short term thinking. Think bigger, and think about the future. Such thinking will cause us all to reduce our waste, and rejuvenate our ways of living.

¹ From United Nations "EarthWatch"

(<http://earthwatch.unep.net/emergingissues/consumption/reduconsump.php>)

² ACF consumption atlas (<http://www.acfonline.org.au/consumptionatlas/>)

³ From WasteNet <http://www.wastenet.net.au/information/hierarchy/avoid>

⁴ Clive Hamilton, Richard Denniss and David Baker, March 2005, Wasteful Consumption in Australia, The Australia Institute, Canberra.

⁵ <http://www.freecycle.org/>

⁶ <http://recyclingnearyou.com.au/>

Are Green Bags Green?

Increasingly, the trend at many grocery stores and major retailers has been an attempt to decrease the use of plastic bags by offering reusable bags for sale at checkout lanes. However, these bags, although recyclable, are not biodegradable and thus they are not eco-friendly.

The majority of these so-called 'green' bags are made from non-woven polypropylene (NWPP), a form of plastic polymer, that requires about 28 times as much energy to produce as the plastic used in standard disposable bags, and eight times as much as a paper sack.

The Bag

Most green bags are made of 100% Non-woven Polypropylene which is recyclable but not biodegradable. Some companies claim to be making NWPP bags from recycled material, however with current manufacturing techniques this is not possible. All NWPP bags are made from virgin material. Most "green bags" are green; some are blue or red.

Similar bags are made of jute, canvas, calico or hemp but are not discussed here. Canvas and calico are made from cotton which can have environmental problems of its own. In general, jute and hemp are more ecologically sustainable crops. Research shows that a typical field of jute consumes over 15 tonnes of harmful CO₂ gas, making the jute plant several times more beneficial to the atmosphere than trees. By rotating with other crops such as rice and potatoes, jute acts as a barrier to pests and diseases for other crops, as well as providing a substantial amount of nutrients to other crops in the form of organic matter and micronutrients.

The base insert

A typical base insert is 200x300 mm and weighs 30g. It is generally made of a stiff plastic. Jute bags are constructed with padded cotton handles, making them equally comfortable to carry by hand or over the shoulder. Also, the bags are easy to pack at the grocery store because they stand up on their own.

Your local health food store may have natural fibre bags, or you could make one yourself from some old clothes or disused material. (A range of patterns can be found on the internet, e.g. <http://www.allfreecrafts.com/sewing/shopping-bag.shtml>)

How We Reduced Food Waste: A Case Study

In the Sydney region, consumption of food accounts for 43% of total consumption and is by far the biggest single contributor to total consumption. But up to a third of food is thrown away and at least half of this food could have been eaten if it was managed better.

Gail has made a concerted effort to reduce food waste after looking for tips on cutting her grocery bill. She lives with her husband. She said: "It started off as being about saving a bit of money. However, I read about the scale of the problem of food waste and also some of the issues it can cause, for example being sent to landfill and releasing methane which is damaging to the environment. I presumed it just decomposed and that was that.

"There's also all the wasted energy that goes into creating and disposing of wasted food. Wasting food is pointless and with some planning it is definitely avoidable."

So, what has Gail done to reduce food waste? She said: "It's been a gradual process. I didn't do everything straight away, but added one thing at a time. Now we waste as little as we can but we're still not perfect."

Tactics to Reduce Food Waste

Gail explained some of the steps she has taken to dramatically reduce her food wastage: "I religiously *meal plan* now. I used to be a bit aimless at the supermarket but now I plan what we are going to have for each meal of the week, or just plan some meals but not the day. I just buy what we need and very few extras. I use my meal plan to write a list so I am not tempted to buy lots of things that we don't need or we just end up eating for the sake of it.

"Also, we have started cooking more. We used to have lots of ready-made food and takeaways. We can both cook quite a few dishes now though and we try to learn a new recipe every few weeks."

Vegetables

Gail said one of the major things she threw away previously was fruit and vegetables. "My meal planning has helped a lot," she says. "I also try to be realistic about the amount of fruit and veg we will actually eat. Before I tried to be healthy and get loads of fruit and veg but it was more than I could ever get through. And I try to make time to shop for fruit and veg twice a week; that way it stays fresh. I also use special bags which keep fruit and veg fresher for longer."

Food Storage

Along with the fruit and vegetable bags she uses, Gail has also learned other useful storage techniques that cut down on waste. She said: "I use my freezer a lot more now. If there are leftovers, I freeze them and I try to make sure there's always enough for a portion. Stuff like Bolognese, lasagne, curry and chilli are good for nights when there's no time or energy to cook."

Keep Reducing Waste

Gail commented on the plans she has to reduce her household food waste even further: "I plan to start freezing bits of leftover veg and meat to make soup. I am also going to try "rubber chicken" where you buy a whole chicken, use it for as many meals as possible, then make soup from the carcass.

"And we are going to get a compost bin. Our local council will help us with that."

<http://www.greenusesforwaste.co.uk/how-we-reduced-food-waste-case-study.html>

Simplify your life by consuming less

Despite us having bigger houses, with much more space to stash stuff than previous generations, the self-storage industry has thrived, and many suburban homeowners have so much garage clutter they can't park their cars indoors.

Do we have too much stuff? Could we be just as happy, or happier, with less stuff? Is it possible to have less stuff without feeling deprived?

Simplicity is not about being a cheapskate. It's about the concept of "less is more." Living on less isn't just prudent. It's actually better. People have varying reasons for living more simply. They include reducing stress, devoting more time to family and community, helping the environment and adhering to religious beliefs.

Here are some easy ways to live more simply:

Take stock. Do you want to discover what's really important to you, not just what you claim is important during cocktail party chit-chat? Take a reflective look at your diary and your chequebook -- or your electronic calendar and your online credit card statement. How you spend your time and your money proves what's important to you.

Take a break. To get a feel for what it would be like to live on less, take a spending hiatus. Resolve to cut out all discretionary purchases for one month. Before long, you'll relearn the difference between true needs and wants. During this time, think about what enough is. If more and more is never enough, you're destined to be unhappy and unfulfilled.

Scale down. For more permanent changes, it might help to dip your toe in the water of simplicity. Instead of dropping all pay television, you could eliminate pay movie channels. Instead of never dining out for work lunches, resolve to eat out only once a week.

Declutter. If you can sell some of that stuff, say on [eBay](#) or the newspaper classifieds, you can do double the good by reducing clutter and making a few dollars. Give it to friends or charity. Find another use for it, recycle or, as a last resort, throw it away. Of course, temporarily purging isn't the goal. Refrain from buying more stuff to replace the old stuff. Use the one-year rule: if you haven't used it or thought about it for a year--and it doesn't have real sentimental value--then get rid of it.

Rediscover simple entertainment. Remember when reading was enjoyable? Can you recall pleasant times when you sat around the kitchen table talking with family or friends? Was there a time that walking, gardening, cooking or visiting a free museum or park felt fulfilling? When is the last time you went to the local library, a cornucopia of free entertainment?

Limit temptations. Stay out of shopping plazas, cancel catalogues and unsubscribe to e-mail store promotions. There's nothing wrong with advertising, but shielding yourself from constant bombardment can help you live simply.

Seek resources. Simple living is not a new concept. Centuries-old religions advocated it. Use the internet or your local library to find more information.

If all that is too much, you can resort to a two-step process for simplifying: Identify what's important to you and eliminate everything else.

Taken from an article by Gregory Karp, author of "Living Rich by Spending Smart."
<http://www.mcall.com/business/columnists/all-karp.6826270mar22,0,1800677.column>

My Clothes Swapping Party: A Case Study

Susie had a clothes swapping party at her house for herself and six other friends. She explained why she decided to have one at home: “Clothes swapping parties are becoming quite popular – I’ve been to a few in town. I have always enjoyed them but there are often a lot of people and it can feel quite competitive in some ways. Me and my friends have a lot of clothes and we’re always moaning about being broke, so I thought it would be a fun way to save money, get some new clothes and meet up.”

Organising the Party

Susie talked about how she went about putting the swishing party together (clothes swapping is also known as “swishing” these days): “I sent out emails and texts to the girls I was inviting about two weeks in advance. I thought I would give them plenty of time to sort out any clothes they wanted to bring. I wanted to give us all a chance to get organised and find some goodies to bring! I told people to bring clothes, shoes and accessories.



“I sent a reminder a few days before to check that everyone was coming. I started to sort out my own contributions as well. In the end I took about six items of clothing that didn’t fit or that I didn’t wear anymore. The clothes were in good condition though. In fact, some of them had hardly been worn, they just weren’t quite right for one reason or another. It’s pretty bad really...I also contributed some plastic jewellery, a pair of shoes and a hat.”

On the Day

So what happened on the day? Was a lot of organisation required? Susie explained: “It wasn’t hard to organise at all. I spent the day clearing up my house and creating space. I just made space in the front room and placed a mirror in there. I also designated the spare bedroom as an area where people could try things on.

“I put out a few nibbles and asked the girls to bring a bottle. We kicked things off about 6.30pm and we had a good laugh. We organised the clothes into types, such as dresses, skirts and tops, etc. Because there were only a few of us and we know each other well, we just went for it. If there were more people, I think you’d need to organise things more. I got a new dress which I love and everyone took at least one thing away. There wasn’t actually that much left but I just took it to a charity shop the following weekend.”

Does Susie have any advice for anyone else thinking of organising a clothes swapping party? She says: “Don’t let me put you off going to the larger, organised swishing events for a start. They can be good too. However, having one at home is a bit more low-key and a good chance to get together with your mates.

“Make sure you have a full-length mirror or two, so people can try on the clothes. Be ruthless and get things from your wardrobe that you haven’t worn in ages. It’s good for decluttering! So, by the same token, only take things away from the party if you know you’ll wear them.”

She concludes: “Small clothes swapping parties are easy to organise and a great way to recycle clothes. We’ll definitely be having another.”

<http://www.greenusesforwaste.co.uk/clothes-swapping-party-case-study.html>