

Free critical thinking about the underwhelming reality of recycling

[Economics](#)



Throwing garbage in the yellow trash can instead of the black one is not admirable, but it may encourage people to think about their consumption and what sustainability means. It is one tool, and the last line of defense in a more comprehensive strategy to reduce waste. Recycling is not difficult, requires no sacrifice, and is much easier than changing lifestyle. It is much easier to recycle plastic bottles than it is to organize and participate in car-pooling. Trading in the SUV for a much smaller fuel efficient car could help, but many Americans identity is intertwined with the car or truck they drive, and asking them to change their behavior could be challenging the very foundation their identity and world-view is based upon. The real problems affecting climate change and environmental contamination are too massive for most Americans to even comprehend, much less feel as though they could exert any influence over.

In "Is Recycling Good for the Environment?". Griff argues that recycling is being used as a diversion, to distract people from the real problem, which is consumption. He pokes holes in some traditionally held beliefs about recycling focusing on unintended consequences. For example, he discusses degradability, which is seen as a good thing, but in reality has some serious negative environmental consequences, such as creating "bacteria farms." His argument is solid logic, but would fail to get traction in reality. His solution is too "big picture". Americans are encouraged to consume, it's the bedrock of our economy, and the center of our social and political structure. After bailing out the auto industry, the government created "cash for clunkers" to encourage Americans to buy new cars to stimulate the economy. However, a fuel efficient used car is better for the environment.

(Squatriglia 2014). Griff's solution of just using less would have its own set of unintended consequences, higher unemployment, stagnant economy, hippy communes. It would require Americans to adopt a new lifestyle and worldview. This would also assume that our political and economic system transform itself into some post-capitalist utopia where people value ideas, relationships and beauty over consuming stuff. Mr. Griff, a "plastics consultant", believes that recycling is a band-aid when we need a tourniquet. However, environmental protection needs to be rooted in reality, and radically changing the way Americans think is going to take a few generations, and for now there is nothing wrong with start small and emphasizing personal responsibility. Recycling, as economically inefficient as it is, has created an awareness that small individual decisions matter in the big picture. Other small changes, like packaging reduction and holding manufacturers responsible for waste can help as well. The big changes are probably more in the realm of corporate industry and governmental regulations anyway.

Some recycling programs literally are just "feel good" programs. The recycling just gets picked up and dumped in the regular trash because it is too expensive to recycle. There are always news stories popping up about city sanitation departments getting caught dumping recycling right into the trash. (Beaudet 2013). Some governments, national and local, want to seem "green" and pro-active on recycling, but the actual economics of recycling is difficult to justify. In a recent essay, "Recycling: Can It Be Wrong, When It Feels So Right?", Michael C. Munger, of the Cato Institute, emphasized that there should be some common sense when it comes to recycling, and

Americans “ should recycle resources, but not garbage. Recycling resources saves resources. Recycling garbage uses up resources” (Munger 2013). He believes, like Griff, that because the idea of recycling is so warm and fuzzy, many people are unable to analyze without emotions or a knee jerk reaction:

Recycling gives people a chance to express their concern about the

environment, and concern about the environment is good. Sure, sometimes the actual effect on the environment is harmful, as in the case of green glass, but that’s a small price to pay for developing the right habits of mind. (Munger 2014).

He goes on to discuss some really ridiculous recycling programs that encourage people to clean their recycling in the dishwasher. They use water, electricity, soap and other resources to clean garbage. This is not just a lack of common sense, but what happens when “ recycling is not an economic activity at all, but a moral duty, without limits and for which cost is irrelevant” (Munger 2014). The absurdity involved with washing out garbage has another effect – people stop believing in any of it. When New Yorkers were recently asked if they recycled and if not why, many who didn’t recycling responded that they had heard that only 5% of the recycling actually gets recycled (Dover 2014). There is a feeling that recycling is a “ scam”.

The U. S. government should focus their resources on regulating industries by making it expensive to be wasteful. They should also encourage and subsidize technologies that make recycling efficient and more economically rewarding. If recycling is financially lucrative it will be exploited more

effectively. Recycling isn't going to save the world, but it's not supposed to. As the technology improves so will the efficiency and eventually it will too expensive not to recycle. Ultimately, recycling is not a solution, but is a necessary responsibility, like taking out the trash.

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