



WWF, the Global Environment Network on waste

Each year people in Britain use more than six billion drinks cans, 12 billion food cans, 1.7 million tonnes of glass, and we use an average of two trees worth of paper each. When we are finished with them, we generally just throw them away. In 1996 almost 25 million tonnes of household waste was generated in England and Wales alone. Happily, however, more and more people are recycling their waste - but what does recycling mean? Is it beneficial, or just a waste of time, materials and energy?

Recycling is the processing of waste or rubbish back into raw materials so that it can be made into new items. It is undoubtedly beneficial - to the individual, the community and the planet. Even so, before recycling we really need to address the problem at its root, and reduce our waste. We can, for example, buy fewer disposable items and more that have a longer life span. We must also learn to re-use our products - using the same bags for shopping, buying refillable items, and repairing products instead of buying replacements.

More than 80 per cent of our rubbish goes into holes in the ground where organic waste decomposes, forming poisonous liquids, which can seep into groundwater and then into rivers and streams, polluting them. But the decomposing waste also creates methane gas as well as CO₂ - and that's where the change in the weather comes in because methane gas is 21 times more damaging to the climate than CO₂ - itself the principal contributor to global warming.

Call it what you like - global warming, climate change, the greenhouse effect - our rubbish and the way we handle it is contributing to an upward shift in the planet's temperature that melts glaciers, causes floods, droughts and other extreme conditions, kills wildlife and crops and upsets the healthy balance of the habitat which may take centuries to correct. Disease flourishes: cold kills germs but as the world warms up - it is about four degrees hotter than it was 13,000 years ago but half a degree hotter than in 1860, which shows the speed of the change - the chances of survival for germs, bacteria, spores and other disease-carriers are increasing substantially.

Climate change and how we dispose of our rubbish may seem worlds apart - but they aren't. The vast natural resources consumed and the waste expelled by industry - roughly ten tonnes of raw materials are used for every tonne of goods we consume - contribute heavily to changing the climate, of course. But so do we in our own kitchens every hour of every day. Diana Brown, WWF's Environmental Management Officer, is quite clear about what's happening and what we should be doing about it: "We are producing too much waste. Whatever we do with it, there are environmental impacts - not least the depletion of finite resources, which could be reused. It comes down to this: people must buy carefully and reduce the amount of waste they create."

In the present consumer society, that's not going to happen overnight - but there are ways of improving the situation and recycling is one of them.

"A start can be made on reducing waste by buying fewer disposable items and more that have a longer lifespan. We must learn to re-use our products - using the same bags for shopping, buying refillable items and repairing products instead of buying new ones."

Some people complain they have neither the space in their homes nor the time to devote to recycling. But, said Diana, these objections were not always valid. "Most supermarkets have recycling facilities so you can use them at the same time as doing your shopping, and local authorities are increasingly providing recycling banks and even kerbside collection." With careful segregation, the waste need not take up any more space - and putting waste in one bin rather than another need not take any more time.

"The main concern is to get people to think about recycling - there's no point in companies specifying minimum recycled contents of their goods if no one supplies the material for recycling - just as there's no point recycling your goods if companies do not demand the material for their products. The key is to try and close the loop by recycling your waste and buying products with a high content of recycled material. With demand for these products increasing, companies will supply more."

Recycling aluminium is of growing importance. The mining of bauxite - the major commercial source of aluminium - is particularly damaging to the environment, so to use an aluminium can once and throw it away only serves to apply extra pressure on the mines and, of course, the raw product.

"Whatever we use and however we use it, we need to minimise waste and recycle what's left," said Diana. "That way we can all make a contribution to combating climate change. It will be well worth it - to ourselves and to future generations."

"There is so much scope for more recycling and more effort by industry and the consumer. While the situation is gradually improving, we must all take part - it is a collective responsibility."