

PRO/CON: Should we throw away the recycling program?

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Adonis Herring sorts cans and bottles at Capital Redemption Center on Sept. 22, 2015, in Albany, New York. The center offers refunds on empty beverage containers before they are transported to distributors and recycled. Photo: AP/Mike Groll

PRO: The costs of recycling outweigh the benefits

If you're worried about the planet, please make sure your garbage is buried in a landfill. There is plenty of space available.

On the surface, the phrase "reduce, reuse, recycle" may seem like a realistic call to action. It makes particular sense to those who want to reduce the amount of oil and gas that are burned and halt climate change, and reduce the amount of garbage we will leave for future generations to deal with.

The truth, however, is that the cost of the recycling process almost always outweighs the benefits.

Even the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says it only makes sense economically and environmentally to recycle about 35 percent of our trash. Among those materials are paper and aluminum cans, according to the government department.

More Expensive And More Electricity

Recycling 1 ton of paper or aluminum cans, the agency says, can save about 3 tons of carbon dioxide emissions over producing new materials. Carbon dioxide, a gas, is produced during the recycling process and can lead to climate change. A ton equals 2,000 pounds.

Not so fast.

Paper mills pay for the trees they process. If it was cheap enough to recycle scrap paper, producers would be beating down your door to buy it. There is a good reason why they aren't.

It's more expensive and takes more electricity and water to recycle old paper than to cut down pine trees, turn them into paper, and then grow new trees.

Plastic, which is made from oil, is another problem. Recently the price of oil has gone way down. It has now become cheaper to make a new plastic container than to recycle an old one.

Also, the EPA says that recycling a ton of plastic saves only about a ton of carbon dioxide. However, that doesn't take into account the water to rinse their plastic containers before people put them into a recycling bin.

John Tierney is a science writer for The New York Times newspaper. He pointed out that if people use hot water to wash plastic containers, they actually contribute to sending more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Coal or gas is burned to heat the water up in the first place.

Are We Pretending About Recycling?

Glass is even worse. To reduce emissions by 1 ton you have to recycle 3 tons of glass. Including the cost of collecting old glass from neighborhoods, and the pollution produced by the collection trucks and the recycling process itself, glass recycling creates more emissions. It is also more expensive than making glass from scratch. New glass is made mainly from sand, and we have plenty of cheap sand in the world.

Many cities pick up glass in recycling trucks only to dump it at the local landfill.

Why are they pretending? Because people feel emotional about the motto "reduce, reuse, recycle." They learn it in school and hear it everywhere they go. Most Americans are blind to the evidence about recycling programs.

More environmentalists should consider the costs and benefits of recycling programs. They should get rid of those that waste money and harm the environment.

If recycling saved money, companies would be lined up at your doorstep to buy your trash. Don't look now, because they're not there.

The true recycling test is whether someone will pay you to sort and save your trash. If they're not, what you've been told about recycling is probably just garbage.

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CON: Recycling cuts down the amount we waste

We Americans use a lot and waste a lot. We dump far more trash than we need to into landfills. In fact, we make twice as much garbage per person as Western Europe.

The amount of trash produced annually in the United States has tripled since 1960. In 2013, it totaled 254 million tons, which comes to 4.4 pounds per person every day. A ton equals 2,000 pounds.

We've made a lot of progress over the years in handling garbage. People started recycling much more after the mid-1980s. On average, Americans today recycle or compost about one-third of their trash.

Seattle's Pay-As-You-Throw System

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is a government department. It reports that we recycle about two-thirds of paper, and just over half of aluminum cans. Yet, we recycle only 4 out of 10 electronics items such as cellphones and computers, and only about one-third of glass containers and even slightly less of plastic bottles and jars.

We should be able to do much better than this. So why don't we? Some people just don't want to bother recycling. A number of states say that people have to recycle, but they don't enforce their laws. In most cases, they do not offer people much reason to recycle.

Some states and cities do much better because they take recycling seriously. Cities such as Seattle, Washington, encourage recycling. Seattle charges people money for throwing out their garbage. People call it a pay-as-you-throw system. Even if the cost is small, it encourages people to recycle, and they do.

In 2014, half the people in Seattle recycled their trash. This rate continues to improve. The city is trying to reduce as much garbage as possible. Few other cities have set such a high goal.

Critics Sending The Wrong Message

Some critics see matters differently. They argue that recycling costs too much and is not effective. Some states seem to agree with them. They do not want to contribute to the cost of city recycling programs and say the cities should end their programs or pay for the cost themselves.

Is this the right action to take? Recycle only if there are enough benefits? Doing that would send exactly the wrong message.

Some experts believe that we should start way before this point. We should prevent or reduce waste when things are made. Then we should reuse what is left over, and only then throw out what cannot be recycled.

No one argues that the cost of recycling is not important. Still, there are ways to deal with that cost rather than say it is too high and abandon recycling programs. We could follow the lead of cities like Seattle by putting a price on trash. If people have to pay more, they will find ways to reduce the amount of trash they throw out. Also, the fees can cover the cost of recycling programs.

We are in the early stages of an important change. It will reduce waste and pollution and get people to change what they use and what they throw out. That's the way to go.

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Quiz

- 1 Which statement BEST compares the points of view of the PRO and CON authors?
- (A) The PRO author is wants to investigate the true cost of recycling, while the CON author wants to avoid talking about the cost.
 - (B) The PRO author supports creating more recycling programs, while the CON author is against more recycling programs.
 - (C) The PRO author wants to reduce the cost of recycling, while the CON author thinks that the cost needs to be increased.
 - (D) The PRO author supports the idea of eliminating recycling programs, while the CON author is against eliminating them.

- 2 How does the PRO author convey his complaints about recycling?
- (A) through citing research about the costs of recycling from experts
 - (B) through various examples of how recycling contributes to waste
 - (C) by providing commentary from the business community
 - (D) by comparing U.S. recycling efforts with those of other nations

- 3 Read this excerpt from the CON author.

Seattle charges people money for throwing out their garbage. People call it a pay-as-you-throw system.

What claim does he intend to support with this statement?

- (A) There are ways to get people to recycle more.
 - (B) There are major challenges for recycling programs.
 - (C) The costs of recycling are currently unknown.
 - (D) The price of throwing away garbage is too expensive.
- 4 The PRO author spends most of his article supporting which of the following statements?
- (A) There is plenty of space available [for trash in a landfill].
 - (B) On the surface, the phrase “reduce, reuse, recycle” may seem like a realistic call to action.
 - (C) The truth, however, is that the cost of the recycling process almost always outweighs the benefits.
 - (D) Even the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says it only makes sense economically and environmentally to recycle about 35 percent of our trash.

Answer Key

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