

Recycling Can Be Worth It, If We Focus Efforts

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The Topic

For decades, people have expressed concern about the environment and how human activity may impact it in a negative way. Conservation efforts have included global concerns about production waste, water pollution, and endangered species. Because the scope of human activity has an array of negative effects, many people feel somewhat powerless to affect any kind of real change. As a result, ecologists and activists have attempted to educate the public about ways that every individual might make small changes that will begin to alleviate long-term effects. One of these methods is household recycling. Recently, however, some people have begun to question the efficacy of recycling as a means for alleviating landfill waste.

The Controversy

An on-going concern is that recycling is not the solution that the U.S. government thought it would be in the 1980s. While many people do not disagree that recycling is a good idea, there is little to incentivize people to recycle. Further, some people even question whether recycling bottles is better for the environment because of the sheer amount of energy resources used in the production of recycled bottles that still cause waste. There is increasing concern about unsustainable resources and whether or not the human race can afford not to recycle.

Pro Side of the Controversy

While there are imperfections in the recycling process, those in favor of recycling contend that investing in the process is worth it because of the positive impacts to the environment. According to the Aluminum Association (as cited in Moss & Scheer, 2015), aluminum cans are the most recycled material, which is good because recycling these cans saves aluminum and only uses 8% of the energy to make a new can. Recycling prevents the release of

dangerous carbon dioxide. According to Moss and Scheer (2015), who interviewed the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2013, recycling and compositing saved nearly 186 million metric tons of carbon dioxide from being released into the atmosphere. Szaky (2015) argues that those against recycling fail to account for the current impacts of failing to recycle. For example, a new study by the 5 Gyres Institute indicates that there are more than five trillion pieces of plastic floating on the surface of the world's oceans, which is roughly the weight of 134,500 average U.S. cars (Elks & Hower, 2014). While the statistics can be staggering, others are concerned about the economic questions regarding recycling and sustainability.

Con Side of the Controversy

Those who question recycling do so on the basis of effectiveness and convenience. Hutchinson (2008) contends that while a plastic water bottle might last in a landfill for centuries, the petroleum reused is barely worth the diesel fuel burned by the large trucks sent to collect the bottles. While recycling aluminum is worth the energy, recycling glass uses 21% less energy (Hutchinson, 2008). There are further concerns about looking at recycling as part of a larger picture. For example, Chris Goodall calculates that “if you wash plastic in water that was heated by coal-derived electricity, then the net effect of your recycling could be *more* carbon in the atmosphere” (as cited in Tierney, 2015). While some cities are attempting to convert to a “zero trash” policy within the next 15 to 20 years, there is no guarantee that these expensive measures will have any positive impacts on the environment; in fact, many speculate that the benefits are few (Tierney, 2015).

Tentative Thesis Statement

Recycling efforts should continue because materials that are recycled are often unsustainable, there should be a more focused effort to recycle materials that have a reproduction-cost benefit.

References

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