

# Secret confessions of a disillusioned recycler

By Drew Jones '90

I'm sick of recycling.

I've read enough articles, received enough flyers and seen enough symbols of little arrows circling smiling trees.

I used to be the obnoxious guy who winced when you tossed paper and aluminum together into a trash can. I wore t-shirts which boasted, "Recyclers do it over and over and over . . ."

But the other day, as I was walking out of Collis, a friend called out, "Hey, Drew, check it out!" She proudly dropped a Diet Coke can into a recycling bin.

I smiled and gave her a thumbs up. "So now that we're recycling," she continued, dumping a plastic knife, fork, spoon, cup and paper plate into an overflowing trashcan, "can I turn up the thermostat?"

I'm disillusioned and frustrated, and I now believe that recycling is overrated. Recycling can make us complacent. It can divert attention from important and difficult changes we need to make in our lifestyles in favor of a convenient act.

We've recently witnessed events that have illuminated the solid waste crisis. A trash barge from New Jersey spent months touring the Eastern Seaboard, searching for a state which would accept its cargo. Hypodermic needles dumped in the ocean appeared on our beaches. Tipping fees at our local landfills are rising. The governor of Vermont has proposed a ban on disposable diapers.

How do we respond to the growing crisis? I think we need to reconsider our role in creating the problem. We need to ask ourselves some important questions: "Where do I fit in? Whose trash is on that barge? Who is filling up those landfills?"

But it's not easy to change the habits which accelerate the solid waste problem. Just as we begin to stand up and change our consumptive ways, the recycling industry gently sits us back down in our comfortable arm chairs, telling us exactly what we want to hear. Recycling says, "It is all O.K. —keep on using and buying. We have an easy way for you to do your part."

Recycling gives us a way to clear our conscience of any fear or guilt through a small change in behavior. Recycling deafens our ears to a resounding truth

that none of us want to hear — we must change our lifestyles to live in harmony with our habitat.

American big business is one of recycling's great supporters. "They are finally doing their part," some say. "It is socially responsible business!" Plastics recycling at McDonalds is a prime example. They are using more energy to change trash into important items such as speed bumps, park benches, flower pots, thumbtack heads, yo-yo's and other products that don't touch food.

Of course Ronald wants us to recycle — it is an inexpensive way to keep consumers from questioning the continued use of petroleum-based disposable materials such as polystyrene, and make us feel good: "Yes, I'll have a

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Big Mac, small fries, medium Coke and a clean conscience — to go."

Recycling one's waste is not enough to earn a clean conscience. Even if every solid waste district in the country recycled 40 percent of all waste (an ambitious rate by any standards), the EPA estimates that one half of our nation's landfills will close in the next decade. At best, recycling is only a very small part of an aggressive solid waste plan. If we must use something, can't reuse it, can't give it to someone else, can't fix it, can't eat it, and can't feed it to something else, only then should we go ahead and recycle it. And then, to complete the loop, we must buy a product made from recycled material.

What shall we do instead?

We must recognize that present thinking focuses on the outflow of materials. The issue today is, "You have

an empty plastic jug, so now what are you going to do with it?" We need to turn our attention to questions concerning the influx of items in our lives: "Why buy your milk in a plastic jug?" We should examine what we buy, how we buy it — what items we use in our lives, not how we can send them away. If your bathtub is filling up too fast, you don't open up the drain, you close the faucet.

A good example of measuring exactly how much is coming out the faucet into our lives is Trashcapade, a project ESD organized this fall. For one week, 120 students, staff and faculty carried all their garbage on their backs in clear plastic bags. Toting both recyclables and non-recyclables, they trudged back and forth to class, to meals, to the library and to rooms.

At first we found it amusing. Each of us quickly became a walking archeological dig. A paper coffee cup with little shot of creamer, a wooden stirrer and a butter-covered plastic knife revealed breakfast. Junk mail from the Sierra Club and Greenpeace defined the day's mail as well as our ideological lean. A pizza box with an empty Coke can gave away our favorite late-night snacks.

But later that week, as we hauled around the rapidly increasing burden of our consumption, we rethought many of our practices. Ceramic coffee mugs soon replaced paper. Subscribers to daily newspapers quickly found libraries with public copies. Dozens of students began carrying metal silverware to dining halls which used plastic. One professor began washing out her plastic bags and writing letters to stop junk mail. We began

carrying bandanas instead of using paper napkins. We found new ways to rationalize the purchase of beer by the keg.

As hard as we tried to stay true to our normal ways, we had to find short cuts. Without the nearby trashcan which takes our discards to that fantasyland that is "away," the drain was stuck shut, and

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we had to examine how much water was rushing into our bathtub, lest we overflow.

Do you want to try a Trashcapade of your own? Try it for Earth Week. You may just join me in saying that you are sick of recycling. More likely, you may see how it is a part to a larger solid waste solution, one that confronts the torrent of water that rushes into the small, over-crowded bathtub that our planet is, and doesn't poke around the bottom, drilling more and more drains.