



The Myth of the Recycling Solution

October 05, 2015

Go Ahead and Put the NYT Op-Ed About Recycling in the Recycling Bin

By Lisa Kaas Boyle

In a *New York Times* opinion piece by science writer John Tierney, "[The Reign of Recycling](#)" (Oct. 3, 2015), the author asks the question, "As you sort everything into the right bins, you probably assume that recycling is helping your community and protecting the environment. But is it?"

Indeed, collecting plastics at curbside fosters the belief that, like paper, aluminum and glass, these will be converted into new similar objects. [But this is not the case with most plastic.](#) The best we can hope for is that our plastic water bottles and mayonnaise jars will be turned into other products (downcycled), such as doormats, textiles, plastic lumber, etc. These products will still end up in a landfill, and therefore, they do not stem the need for more virgin petroleum product.

And for recycling to work, there needs to be infrastructure in place so that communities can handle the waste stream. Most of the world and many communities in our own nation have no capacity to recycle plastics at all. Those that do tend toward incineration, which releases dangerous dioxins into the atmosphere.

The real issue is about changing the products we use and the fuels we consume, and learning to live a less disposable lifestyle, rather than relying on recycling—or downcycling—as the solution. Recycling is the last choice—after Reduce and Reuse. But Tierney jumps straight to recycling vs. landfill, missing the opportunity to reduce waste.

In his op-ed, Tierney states, "It's still typically more expensive for municipalities to recycle household waste than to send it to a landfill. Prices for recyclable materials have plummeted because of lower oil prices and reduced demand for them overseas."

Recycling has been relentlessly promoted as a goal in and of itself, according to Tierney, who calls it "an unalloyed public good and private virtue that is indoctrinated in students from kindergarten through college."

But as he chides recycling as expensive and wasteful, the author totally misses the boat on calling for producer responsibility to create better biodegradable materials for packaging and single uses and/or to collect their products and packaging to reuse in a complete cycle. He also fails to calculate the external costs of making

products and packaging from fossil fuels that pollute our environment at every step of creation before they end up in a landfill, in a downcycled plastic product that is just another step from the landfill, or in our environment, as plastic pollution.

Recycling paper, glass and metal is a complete cycle, while plastic is generally not. The value of cradle-to-cradle recycling—which models human industry on nature’s processes—should be higher. It should be favored by policy, as it reduces the need for virgin materials, over the downcycling of plastics, which should be phased out, along with our reliance on fossil fuels for energy.

In the U.S., 93 percent of plastics are NOT recovered (put in plastic “recycling” bins). These go straight to landfills. PET bottles that have a redemption value (cash value) fare a bit better; yet 62 percent are NOT recovered, according to EPA data.

How big is the problem? How much waste is generated by single-use plastic bottles?

Artist Chris Jordan offers the following visualizations. Imagine eight football fields covered thickly with plastic bottles. This is equivalent to [the number of plastic beverage bottles discarded in the U.S. every five minutes](#). Now imagine a line of plastic water bottles going around the planet five times. This would be equivalent to the number of plastic bottles discarded every week in the U.S., just for water!

Not all recycling is equally valuable. True cradle-to-cradle recycling is the most valuable because it conserves virgin materials. Plastic recycling is generally not cradle-to-cradle, but just downcycling to fill or fluff or other stuff that does not stem the demand for more virgin material.

Most significantly, plastic pollution will not be solved by recycling because it doesn’t stop the continual flow of new virgin-material plastic disposable goods every day that enter our environment like a giant oil spill. We need to STOP plastic pollution at the source by phasing out single-use plastics and plastic packaging.

This is something we should do now in every community, especially those with no recycling capacity.

Lisa Kaas Boyle is an environmental attorney and co-founder of [Plastic Pollution Coalition](#).

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EDITOR’S NOTE: This story has been updated from an earlier post.