

# The Rewards of Recycling

*Not as Rewarding as Reducing but still Remarkable*

## **“No Deposit No Return”**

These here were revolutionary words in the late 1960's. Until that time, all soft drink bottles carried a deposit—the buyer put down a few cents when purchasing the drink, reclaiming the money when the empty drink bottle was returned. “No deposit, no return” was seen as a tremendous advance, a sign of genuine progress for a consumer society that was beginning to explode with consumption and bask in convenience. One no longer had to worry about bringing the bottle back—it could just be pitched, at no cost to the pitcher. Directly, that is.

## **Pay me now...or pay me later...**

Of course any potentially recoverable item that is discarded after a single use has a longer-term cost to the ecosystem—and indirectly to all of us. This comes in the form of the materials that need to be newly mined or logged or created from petrochemicals, as well as the energy needed to re-create these items from scratch (including initial extraction, shipping and processing).

## **Cost/benefit analysis**

Here are the facts regarding US consumption and recycling—and lack thereof—of everyday items such as cans and paper, along with the potential savings from recycling.

### *Beverage containers*

US consumers use around 190 billion plastic, aluminum and glass containers each year—*two containers per person per day*. Only half of these are recycled.

#### Aluminum cans

US citizens use 350 aluminum cans per person per year; altogether we discard 51 billion of these energy intensive spheres every year. This equals 2.2 million tons of aluminum.

- Recycling a single aluminum can saves 5 pounds of bauxite and the energy equivalent of 6 ounces of gasoline.*
- Recycling all the aluminum used in the US would save as much energy as is required to power New York City—and 800,000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>.*

#### Glass

US consumers recycle around 35% of glass bottles. Recycling glass saves 10 percent of the energy needed to create it from scratch.

#### Plastic

Manufacturing one million tons of plastic creates 732,000 tons of global warming gases. Recycling plastic saves 75% of the energy and the pollutants. Each year, we pitch 1.5 million tons of plastic bottles.

### *Paper Products*

The United States consumes consume 30 percent of world's paper; 760 pounds per person per year (110 pounds is global per capita consumption).

*Every pound made from virgin wood requires 3.5 pounds of wood, 10 BTU's of energy, and generates 3 pounds CO<sub>2</sub>.*

Paper made from recycled content creates 74% less air pollution and 35% less water pollution; needs 43% less energy; and generates 33% less CO<sub>2</sub>, 50% less solid waste, and 50% less waste water (paper production is the leading cause of water pollution in the United States). Every pound of paper made from 100 percent recycled content saves 3.5 pounds of wood.

### *Miscellaneous*

Industry's use of remanufactured parts--things like motor vehicle parts--saves 11 million barrels of oil/year.

Recycling 60% of US solid waste would save 315 million barrels of oil/year.

Seattle spends \$105 per ton to dispose of trash; \$28 per ton to collect and process recyclables.

*Trash Talk*

While not the most important environmental choice we make—vehicle travel, household energy and diet choices are more impactful—recycling does indeed pay off in energy and material savings. Plus it's often one of the simplest ways to make a daily choice for a more sustainable future. And it's just a good habit to think of reusing everything that passes through our hands, seeing items as energy treasures just waiting to find their way back in our hands—perhaps in some new incarnation—the second or third or fourth time around.

*New Community Project*

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*Statistical Source: World Watch Institute*