

Decisions, Decisions: Cleaning Up America's Recycling Confusion

by Jennifer A. Haugh

Jennifer A. Haugh is a 2011 Mid-Career Master in Public Administration candidate at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, focusing on leadership, decision science, and the environment. She is an obsessive recycler.

For the second or third time today, you're standing in front of a trash can, which sits next to a recycling bin. This time you're holding a paper Starbucks coffee cup encased by a cardboard cozy and topped with a spill-proof plastic cover. You've drained the last few drops of your fully caffeinated Costa Rica blend and are rushing off to a meeting, but you pause, confronting what has become a common moral dilemma for just about a millisecond: which bin? If you're like most Americans, you aren't quite sure what, if any, of this ensemble belongs in the recycling bin. So into the trash—and off to a landfill—it goes.

We're on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, a book published in 1962 that scared the living daylights out of American suburbanites across the nation and gave birth to the colicky modern environmental movement. Household recycling is one of the few consumer-oriented environmental success stories that has emerged since the 1960s. It has become the poster child of individuals' sincere efforts to curb climate change. Though constituting a relatively small makeup of greenhouse gas emissions (fossil fuel burning being at the top), recycling serves as a key starting point for most Americans to embrace the challenges we'll likely have to face with other lifestyle changes down the road. And yet, somewhere along the way, we've gotten caught up in a myopic eddy of "should we or shouldn't we?" in each confrontation with the circular file. It's time to demystify American recycling practices to free up our energies and focus on other ways to reduce our carbon footprint. There are simple steps we can take to see dramatic increases in the amount of waste that Americans recycle.

Somewhere along the way, we've gotten caught up in a myopic eddy of "should we or shouldn't we?" in each confrontation with the circular file.

Waste in Context

We have a lot of good reasons to recycle: it promotes local manufacturing jobs, conserves natural resources, saves energy, and reduces greenhouse gas emissions caused by methane emitted from landfills. In fact, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) cites municipal solid waste landfills as the nation's second-largest human-generated source of methane emissions (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency n.d.a.). Meat lovers, take note: the number one methane emission source cited by the EPA is enteric fermentation—code for the gastrointestinal activities of domestic livestock (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency n.d.b.).

Americans overall generated 250 million tons of trash and recycled or composted 83 million tons of material in 2008, about 33.2 percent recycling overall, shy of the relatively unambitious 2008 EPA target of 35 percent (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2008). By comparison, the Netherlands, Austria, and Germany are recycling approximately 60 percent of their respective country's waste (Eurostat 2006). The EPA cites that some American cities have successfully recycled or composted up to 65 percent of average household waste (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 1999). Given the upward trend of trash generation by Americans (from 3.66 to 4.34 pounds per person per day between 1980 and 2009), the fact that

more than half of our nation's waste is hitting landfills indicates that there's a pretty big gap between what is being recycled and what is recyclable (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency n.d.c.)

The EPA published findings from its 1999 Waste Reduction Record-Setters Project, highlighting the practices of eighteen successful recycling programs throughout the United States in communities like Portland, Madison, and Seattle. Unfortunately, the report provides only illustrations of models that work and suggestions of ways to improve participation rates. What it lacks is a vision, targets, and meaningful standards or requirements for states, making it another in a series of toothless EPA policy interventions up against a crunchy issue.

Tackling Environmental Change at the Lifestyle Level

Each time we stop at a trash bin, we're making a decision that affects the environment. Our overall individual carbon footprint is calculated by a number of lifestyle choices: whether we dine on porterhouses and red wine or enjoy a locally grown vegetable salad; whether we live alone in a sprawling exurban McMansion or in a small condo with a family; whether we jack up the thermostat to play the Halo video game or curl up in a Snuggie blanket to finish a tattered copy of *Flowers in the Attic* on the sofa; whether we fly first class



or carpool with our Toyota Prius from Cambridge to Key West. The road to environmentally sustainable lifestyles is a treacherous and bumpy ride; it's not easy to ask people to reconsider their creature comforts. Some might think it downright un-American. So let's start with something simple: let's recycle more.

But the trouble with recycling is that the rules of the game vary widely from place to place. Messages are mixed. For example, phone books are recyclable in Cary, NC, but not in nearby Durham, even though the cities' recyclables are taken to the same sorting facility. The resin number in the chasing arrows on the bottom of a Diet Pepsi bottle gives direction to a Pasadena, CA, recycler, but it's meaningless to folks in Minneapolis, who are directed to recycle only "plastic bottles with necks" (leading to deep thinking at the trash bin on the meaning of the word "neck"). Pizza boxes, milk cartons, and paper cups are alternately acceptable or will poison the well, depending on whom you ask. Recycling programs vary so greatly that the dizzying rules and regulations do a pretty fabulous job of discouraging participation in environmental best practices at the most basic levels. It's no wonder Americans are baffled and ambivalent, if not outright frustrated, about something so basic as recycling. The system sets us up to fail.

Consider the following potential recyclables:

- A paper coffee cup "made from 50% postconsumer recycled content"
- A grease-stained pizza box
- A plastic take-home leftovers container imprinted with a No. 5 in chasing arrows
- Unmarked semi-hard plastic packaging for small electronics and toys (the kind where it takes a small hatchet saw to get at the goods)

You may ask: what would Al Gore do? In some municipal recycling programs, we're instructed to disassemble and separate complex recyclables such as Pringles containers or milk cartons with plastic caps. In others, glass and paper refuse to get along, even after extensive couples therapy. In most cases, however, despite the majority of recyclable content in the list above, consumers usually first throw up their hands in frustration and then throw these items in the garbage.

Cleaning up the Process

Given these relatively minor examples, imagine the mushrooming complexity involved in the challenge of priming folks to begin tackling the problems of sustainability. The environmental movement and the EPA need to

understand where average folks have been stuck for decades. In other words, let's put an end to this confusion at the basic waste management levels and start clarifying how we consumers can succeed at this.

As such, with the goal of higher participation rates in U.S. recycling programs, we may wish to consider a three-pronged approach:

1. Establish a 2020 vision statement, underscored with residential recycling participation targets that provide focus to municipal recycling programs.

Again, federal recycling directives have at times been as enigmatic as a Saturday New York Times crossword puzzle, affecting both regional programming and the actions of consumers. Without a crisp, memorable, and ambitious (yet achievable) vision statement and clear directives to states, any nationwide recycling communications campaigns will lack salience. Why stop and rest at a wimpy 34 percent? Why not aspire to trounce the Dutch in the next ten years?

2. Phase in standardized and simplified collection methods as part of a nationwide single- or dual-stream recycling model to help create uniformity and consistency for consumers.

Multiple studies have been published about best practices regarding collection methods for recyclable materials; the debate about collection methods and their varying pros and cons is fierce. The argument boils down to whether it's better to have fully commingled (single-stream) recycling collection, which is simpler for households but yields a higher rejection rate at a material recovery facility (an average of 7 percent), or segregated

(dual- or multi-stream) collection that requires more cognitive input on the part of recyclers. It remains unclear which method is preferable, either economically or environmentally. Either way, while environmentalists would like to think the public is ready and willing to spend the energy on making good decisions at the waste bin, it's perhaps an unrealistic expectation, and yet the environmental literacy currently required to sort recyclables demands precisely this level of cognition. Scott Mouw, North Carolina's state recycling program director, agrees, "In my opinion, and I think a lot of professionals feel this way, the public can't be expected to do a lot of thinking about this" (Mouw 2010).

3. Align collection systems with clear product recyclability labeling to reduce recycling bin contamination, increase participation, and encourage environmentally preferable product/packaging choices. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission just closed a public comment period (December 10, 2010)

Why stop and rest at a wimpy 34 percent? Why not aspire to trounce the Dutch in the next ten years?

on new proposed industry regulations that would increase transparency on product labeling. One pertinent component of these proposed regulations is the inclusion of product recyclability as opposed to merely suggesting postconsumer recycled content. The Sustainable Packaging Coalition has

Recycling programs vary so greatly that the dizzying rules and regulations do a pretty fabulous job of discouraging participation in environmental best practices at the most basic levels.

been urging new product labeling that would essentially suggest one of three categories: (1) highly recyclable, (2) possibly recyclable/check your local recycling system, and (3) not recyclable. But these proposed labels may not go far enough to aid consumers in their decision-making processes. A crucial element to labeling is the means of communication; one needs only to remember the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's color-coded security threat rating system to realize that certain messages ("orange!") get lost in translation. A main concern of the Sustainable Packaging Coalition's second option above is that it may be a return to the gray area of product recyclability according to geographic variability. The best-case scenario involves product labels that are easily visible and interpretable by consumers of nearly all stripes—regardless of English-speaking ability, age, or literacy—and aligned with recycling programs nationwide. In the long run, effective product labeling and transparency will also put pressure on industries to rethink unsustainable packaging and provide more socially responsible choices for consumers.

Transforming recycling labeling as well as the recycling system in the United States will be a tough pill to swallow for overburdened municipalities and communities already facing budget shortfalls. Let's face it: conversion costs will not be cheap, and we don't even collect enough local data to gauge

reasonable estimates. But it may be possible to create financial incentives, either by way of federal grants, commercial partnerships, or market-based solutions, to help cover these costs, particularly if efforts are rolled out over the long run. And for that, we need a strong vision. Either way, environmental leadership from the federal government is necessary to pave the way toward greater consumer and producer responsibility with respect to recycling.

A Place to Start

While it's probably more comfortable to depersonalize climate change and instead focus on sweeping legislation or blaming industry practices, we have to take a look at the sum of all of our individual actions and see where we might be the culprits. We go through a lot of trash in this country because we have traditionally been blessed with abundance. The fundamental problem of American overconsumption has existed since the post-World War II era of peace, prosperity, and pink washing machines. But as the recent economic crisis and environmental trends suggest, a sea change may be required to spark a widespread culture of conservation among Americans. Good recycling policies could be a first step toward moving in this direction, as we spend less of our time and energy interpreting recycling collection rules and more energy on increasingly

ambitious consumer-related climate change targets. Perhaps then we can look at additional strategies to address other American consumptive behaviors through revitalized campaigns to reduce our consumption and reuse what we can—like a washable container for that daily cup of Starbucks coffee. It's just one less paralyzing decision to have to make every day.

REFERENCES

Eurostat. 2006. e-Digest of environmental statistics. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) (<http://ww2.defra.gov.uk>).

Mouw, Scott. 2010. Telephone interview, December 6.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. 1999. Cutting the waste stream in half: Community record-setters show how (www.epa.gov/epawaste/conserve/downloads/f99017.pdf).

———. 2008. Municipal solid waste generation, recycling, and disposal in the United States: Facts and figures for 2008 (www.epa.gov/epawaste/nonhaz/municipal/pubs/msw2008rpt.pdf).

———. n.d.a. Methane emissions from landfills (www.epa.gov/lmop/basic-info/index.html#a02).

———. n.d.b. Methane: Sources and emissions (www.epa.gov/methane/sources.html).

———. n.d.c. Wastes - non-hazardous waste - municipal solid waste (www.epa.gov/epawaste/nonhaz/municipal/index.htm).

Copyright of Kennedy School Review is the property of President & Fellows of Harvard College and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.