

A Need for Recycling:  
An Analysis of Recyclings Impact on Society  
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### Abstract

This paper explores conflicting views on recycling through the use of literary research. This essay also explains why the act of recycling is important environmentally, economically, socially, and personally by investigating environmentalist's concerns as well as the President of the United States motivation for recycling. The articles within this paper target the need for recycling and the effects recycling has on the industrial societies as well as both human and animal health surrounding us every day. Through multiple sources, this paper examines recycling as a rising problem that needs to start happening more habitually to benefit society as a whole.

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#### Introduction:

In a developing world that continues to dramatically advance technologically, it is crucial to become familiar with the importance of recycling and the effects it has on the industrial societies, as well as the natural habitats that surround us every day. The concept of recycling is not foreign; the environment has and continues to naturally cleanse itself through things like the water cycle and the rock cycle. Even humans have practiced the act of recycling for centuries, through simple gestures such as handing clothes down to younger siblings or selling reusable goods in a yard sale. However, over time, the dramatic shift in human living habits has ultimately left the earth to deplete, and as a result, it is unable to naturally rejuvenate to the same extent as before. Thus, it is crucial for people to become aware of recycling and better understand the positive and negative effects it has upon the earth.

#### Content Explanation of the Topic:

Americans alone generate approximately 250 million tons of household trash each year (Weeks, 2007). However, less than half of these Americans fail to recycle properly. Consequently, recycling presents the earth with countless environmental implications. For example, the earth loses an acre of tropical forest every second due to the amount of paper, pencils, and wood that is used, yet not properly recycled. Moreover, through acts such as logging, mining, and driving around large cars and SUV's, the overall health of the earth continues to suffer each day (Weeks, 2007). However, by recycling, such environmental effects

can be prevented. Recycling substantially helps global warming by assisting in reducing the amount of greenhouse gasses that are produced every day (Hamilton County Department, 2008). Hamilton County Department reports that, “in a study that involved 35,116 tons of material, it was found that the reduction in green gas emissions was equivalent to taking 22,140 cars off the road (2008).” It was also reported that recycling one newspaper is equivalent to saving 12 trees. Although the United States continues to use new products, it must be noted that by recycling and reusing these products, we are paving a better future for the environment that we live in.

Furthermore, the concept of recycling also attracts several economic implications. Many corporations choose not to recycle because it can prove to be rather costly after required and pricey processes such as bleaching are performed. However, choosing not to recycle creates a demand for new products, and thus a demand for new things such as aluminum, glass, or metal, which can be extremely expensive (South Carolina Department of Solid Waste Reduction & Recycling, 2011). Recycling also helps the United States economy. For instance, “by turning waste into valuable raw materials, recycling creates jobs, builds more competitive manufacturing industries and adds significantly to the U.S. economy” (South Carolina Department of Solid Waste Reduction & Recycling, 2011). Recycling also stimulates the growth of Green technology, which allows businesses to develop new products and services that utilize many reusable materials. These implications will be discussed in detail later.

While it may be obvious that recycling has more benefits than harm, many anti-environmentalists continue to question whether or not recycling is both time and cost efficient, and more importantly, if it will prove to be successful in years to come. Americans have contemplated the benefits of recycling for decades, and many continue to argue that recycling is

a costly act that does not always come with noteworthy advantages. However, many households and companies have made efforts to recycle more. This paper will present both views of recycling, and through the use of literary research, will explore why the act is important environmentally, economically, socially, and personally.

#### Research Literature Review:

First, on November 15, 2010, President Barack Obama presented a proclamation in which he addressed the damaging effects of technology, and elaborated on the significance of recycling electronics appropriately. He began the proclamation by stating, “Each small act of conservation, when combined with other innumerable deeds across the country, can have an enormous impact on the health of our environment” (Obama, 2010). Obama also discusses how the increased use of technology in the average American household, and attempts to explain that when these electronics are misused and disposed of improperly, they cause potential harmful effects to the human earth. After briefly discussing the importance of “conserving precious resources and reducing carbon footprint,” he proclaims that businesses, the government, and individuals must begin to work together to manage technology by recycling, recovering, and accurately disposing products. Finally, he chooses to remind American’s of this by declaring November 15<sup>th</sup> as America Recycles Day (Obama, 2010).

By following the suggestions of President Obama, eliminating e-waste, or used electronic goods, may prove to be beneficial to the health of humans. “The United Nations Environment Programme estimates that 20-50 million metric tons of e-waste are generated worldwide every year (Weeks, 2007).” Additionally, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, only 15

to 20 percent of the United States electronics were discarded and recycled in 2005. While the research is outdated by six years, the e-waste only accounted for two percent of the United States solid waste in 2005, and this number has only increased since 2011. E-waste pollutes ground water and threatens human health for countless reasons. For example, computers contain copper, zinc, cadmium, beryllium and arsenic, all which can be dangerous in small doses. Today, most e-waste recycling occurs in developing countries, where labor is of low cost and environmental standards are less stringent when compared to the United States. The sudden burst in technology and electronic products is a relatively young phenomenon, one that will most likely be around forever. Thus, as the growth of technology increases at a rapid pace, it is important for individuals to properly recycle electronic goods to avoid harm to their overall health, as well as the health of the environment.

#### Real-World Application of the Topic:

Prior to Obama's proclamation, several other researchers and environmentalists have spent a great deal of time fighting for recycling to become an active part of everyday life. While many researchers focus on the environmental effects that recycling can have on humans, in an article printed in *The New York Times* in November 2007, Katherine Mieszkowski, an environmentalist and senior writer for Salon.com and *Fast Company* magazine, explains how choosing not to recycle is also damaging to animals. She begins her article by stating that the first step in recycling is to recycle "nasty little plastic bags (Mieszkowski, 2007)." In the article, titled "Bad Bags," Mieszkowski states, "recycling plastic bags is as good a beginning as any. Starting, maybe, with the blue bag the newspaper came in (Mieszkowski, 2007)." The fact is that plastic bags are extremely injurious to both humans and animals. Approximately two percent of the 100

billion plastic bags produced in the United States are recycled each year, and it takes millions of barrels of oil to produce the bags in general (Weeks, 2007). Unlike materials that carry some weight, plastic bags have the ability to catch wind and travel from place to place. Mieszkowski focuses on how plastic bags enter the ocean and ultimately harm unknowing marine mammals. Dr. Richard Bailey, executive director of the Lake Merritt Institute in California, continues this thought in the article *Plastic Bags Are Killing Us*, and shares why he is most concerned about the bags that get waterlogged and sink to the bottom. He states, "We have a lot of animals that live on the bottom: shrimp, shellfish, sponges," he says. "It's like you're eating at your dinner table and somebody comes along and throws a plastic tarp over your dinner table and you" (Mieszkowski, 2007).

Unfortunately, the continuous amount of debris that Dr. Bailey is concerned with is traveling to the ocean and accumulating into a patch recognized world-wide as the "Atlantic Garbage Patch." Within this patch of waste lies millions of plastic, aluminum, and nettings pieces that has been turned into a deathtrap for millions of sea creatures. When a group of scientists from Scripps Institution of Oceanography set sail on an expedition into the Atlantic Garbage Patch they were able to witness first hand the seriousness of the issue. Chief scientist Miriam Goldstein explained the approach the scientist took while on their journey. "We targeted the highest plastic-containing areas so we could begin to understand the scope of the problem" (2009). As scientist approached the patch they were shocked to discovery how easily it was to sea the patch of debris form about the water. It became obvious quickly how dangerous the garbage was, and continues to be, to the habitat of marine life.

While there have been large debates on whether or not recycling will improve our environment's wellbeing, there are only a few economic disputes and issues that are connected to

recycling. Where it is free for the average American to recycle products, it costs companies extra money to contribute to recycling or creating recycled goods. While plastic bags are continuing to damage natural environments and kill countless animals, several researchers are still against recycling plastic goods due to factors such as its cost. It is the high cost of recycled material compared to new materials that have companies against recycling (Patterson, 2008). Since plastics are relatively easy and inexpensive to produce, many companies do not see the need to recycle materials that will provide low economic advantages. Materials such as plastic, glass, aluminum, and paper have low value, yet are expensive to reuse or recycle. Plastic cannot be recycled in to its original form, and therefore recycling the material often results in lower quality products. Moreover, plastic water bottles can take up to one million years to biodegrade or disintegrate into the earth. By recycling, the same plastic water bottles can end up being reused into new containers, reducing greenhouse gases and saving landfills time and money.

Fortunately, several states in the United States have begun to make this effort. “Since 2003, California, Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas and Washington have passed laws that require certain electronic products to be recycled and set up systems to pay for it (Weeks, 2007)” Additionally, companies such as Dell Computer are offering free recycling for its products at any time. Other companies such as Hewlett-Packard, Apple, and Toshiba will also take back certain products, but may charge a service fee for doing so.

On the other hand, Daniel K. Benjamin, an economics professor at Clemson University, believes that society would function better if everyone simply discarded materials. This, according to Benjamin, will allow low-income individuals to find a purpose for material goods that would otherwise be made into something insignificant. He states, “Recycling household

discards is the business of the poor, but only until they have improved their lot enough to pass it on to those who would follow in their footsteps (Weeks, 2007). Yet, what Benjamin fails to note is that recycling items such as plastic requires less energy than producing new products. Then, less fuel is being used each day.

Next, recycling also has the ability to stimulate the economy by providing more jobs. In just Ohio alone, the recycling industry supports 4.3% of employment (Hamilton County Department, 2008). The National Recycling Coalition also reports that recycling in the U.S. is a \$236 billion a year industry. Unlike jobs in waste disposal, jobs in the recycling industry add value to the materials, as such contribute to a growing labor force of skilled workers, such as material sorters, dispatchers, truck drivers, sales representatives, process engineers and even chemists. Many of these jobs pay above the average national wage and many are in urban areas where jobs are desperately needed (Hamilton County Department, 2008). According to the U.S. Recycling Economic Information Study, there are more than 56,000 recycling and reuse establishments in US and they employ approximately 1.1 million people (South Carolina Department, 2011). This number of workers is comparable to the automobile and truck manufacturing industry in the region, and is significantly larger than the mining and waste management and disposal industries there (North County Recycles, 2010). Hence, the recycling business sector is growing and developing into an extremely promising industry.

With the issues discussed above, several researchers believe that there is a waste disposable crisis in the United States, and that nations may run out of landfill space. In “The Future of Recycling” by writer and researcher Jennifer Weeks, it is said that the U.S. has “20-50 years of landfill capacity, although some states have as little as five years worth” (Weeks, 2007).

Other researchers, such as Brenda Platt, believe that landfill capacity is not the issue, but instead it is the long-term effects the landfills will have on the public health. Platt states, “We all know landfill liners will eventually leak, so we’re just postponing the impact of our consumption” (Weeks, 2007). In short, recycling has become increasingly important to society and industry to meet the goals of cost reduction, efficient management of limited resources, and reduced landfill utilization.

Finally, there are also several social issues connected to recycling. As recycling becomes increasingly popular among the U.S. culture, several trends related to recycling have formed. Many companies have begun to place “environmentally friendly” messages on their products to gain acceptance from consumers. These products can be found at local convenience stores making them easily accessible by the average consumer. Additionally, several fashion designers have begun to use recycled goods. Singers such as Lady Gaga have even been spotted wearing outfits made of recycled objects, such as Kermit the Frog dolls and bubble wrap. This has left many researchers to question whether Americans genuinely care about the environment, or if some are just choosing to support the so-called “fad” to gain social acceptance. Moreover, since “green” items tend to be more expensive, it can be implied that those who recycle, buy organic products, and drive hybrid cars are more pretentious than those who do not. However, this, of course, is not always the case.

The idea of recycling has also become a popular trend in the curriculum of many school districts across America. Administrations nationwide have implemented recycling clubs and activities within the school system to increase student’s knowledge and participation in recycling. The article *Trash Pie* by authors Hoover and Curran takes readers inside an

elementary school where third, fourth, and fifth grade students have joined together to take action against unrecycled trash at lunch. After conducting weeks of research, students were able to conclude that 41% of their school-lunch trash was plastic. In other words, at least 41% of the trash being thrown away was nonbiodegradable and would soon end up in landfills rather than recycling bins (Hoover & Curran, 2010). For students to understand how much of that trash they contributed, each student was asked for one week to document the amount of trash he or she threw away during lunch. The results were shocking.

Each student was given a “Cafeteria Trash Survey Handout” (Hoover & Curran, 2010) where they were required to write down every piece of trash they threw away from food scrapes to cardboard and from paper to plastic. According to one sample survey handout provided within the article, this particular student by the end of the first week threw away twenty-six food scrapes and nineteen pieces of plastic. These were the two highest numbers found within the five categories of trash provided on the survey sheet. As a total, this student threw away 64 pieces of trash in only one weeks lunch period. Of the 64 pieces thrown away, 30% was plastic and 41% were food scrapes. (Hoover & Curran, 2010). Fortunately, the largest amount of trash was biodegradable however, the second largest (plastic) was not. After seeing the results, students were surprised at the amount of trash they contributed to and were now eager to start recycling within their school.

Collectively, the students brainstormed and decided to take action by starting a recycling program to help reduce the amount of materials that were being sent to landfills. This program consisted of students, teachers, and other eager faculty. The team of recyclers were now able to decide where recycling bins would be set up throughout the cafeteria. They were also now in charge of monitoring and evaluating the recycling program at their school to make sure it was

being effective (Hoover & Curran, 2010). Through recycling programs students are becoming well educated on the benefits and need for recycling. By planting the seed of knowledge this will hopefully encourage students to make recycling more of a habit rather than a hassle.

All in all, each year in the United States, we generate nearly 200 million tons of solid waste—an average of 4.3 pounds per person per day. Communities across the United States are skirmishing to find means by which to handle such a rapidly growing problem. An easy answer to part of this problem is recycling much of this waste and becoming aware of different ways to reuse it. In an article entitled *Go Green*, Author Jane Neale provides great suggestions on how to recycle used materials. Neale also recommends purchasing paper with a high percentage of recycled content when it comes to printing and writing (Neale, 2008). It is important for humans to realize that recycling affects everyone, even average home owners. Many Americans may not think of their houses as a place of danger, however, things such as old paint cans in basements can prove to be hazardous waste. In order for society to continue to function, individuals must adapt to the demands of the environment by recycling objects that be reused in one way or another.

Recycling is crucial to the existence of not only the human race, but also the earth and the environment as a whole. With the increase in population, technology, and globalization, human begins have reached a limbo, one that suggests if recycling is not consistent, the earth will continue to deteriorate. Jeffery Morris, the Principal of the Sound Resource Management group in Washington, explains, “With the developing world taking off economically, demand for resources is picking up, and this trend is not going to subside. There aren’t enough raw materials out there at decent prices for manufacturers to get what they want” (Hamilton County

Department, 2008). Moreover, many items that we may think have little value now, may have a high value in the future. For instance, 10 years ago recycling cooper was considered a waste of time, yet today it is greatly valued.

Conclusion:

Recycling is incredibly important to society today and it is more important than ever to save the environment. In order to adapt to the changes in the environment, humans must change many behaviors and habits. In today's society it is difficult to avoid signs of recycling; trash cans are slowly being accompanied by green recycling bins, and countless businesses and corporations are attempting to sell green related products and/or services. Although this has not always been the case, the buzz of recycling continues to engulf our society. Several researchers have and continue to release information discussing what must be done, or not done by the typical citizen. Whether these researchers defend or attack recycling, each will agree that knowing about the topic is important, as it affects the world both environmentally and socially.

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