

Recycling under attack

-the green hornet

Last November 11, there was an article on treehugger.com that was titled Recycling is BS; Make Nov. 15 Zero Waste Day, Not America Recycles Day. I learned two things from that article: 1. that apparently, Nov. 15 is called America Recycles Day and 2. there is at least one other person in the world who might also be a little wary of the whole notion of recycling. Personally, I've always been a little curious as to how much of recycling is hype, how much is actually useful, and how you would tell the difference.

The person who wrote the article, Lloyd Alter, takes it one step further and actually proposes that recycling is a conspiracy, perpetrated by big business in order to appease environmentalists. It all started with the introduction of disposable bottles in the early 1950s and the subsequent "Keep America Beautiful" campaign that was formed in order to address the proliferation of those bottles. Evidently, the strategy of the campaign was to invent the word 'litter', place the blame of litter on litterers, and remove any sense of culpability on the part of the manufacturers.

So through the next several decades, various movements assisted in getting litter off the streets and into the landfills, but then in the 1980s, we started to run out of landfill space. There were few other options to dispose of 'litter' and this condition led to the advent of recycling as a solution. This, in the view of Lloyd the author, is fallacious because "recycling is simply the transfer of producer responsibility for what they produce to the taxpayer who has to pick it up and take it away".

Of course Mr. Alter dismisses recycling and endorses a 'zero waste' philosophy, which appears more nuanced than literal. He is actually suggesting that we 'remove recycling from the three R's, and use repair instead'. Further, Mr. Alter says we should 'demand returnable bottles and deposits on everything'; talk about an inconvenient truth.

That notion of 'zero waste' sure could be expanded on and since the author didn't do it, we'll do it here. I think we can recognize that everything we do generates waste; a more appropriate slogan would be "zero humans" or maybe "minimal waste". In fact there is a group out there with the initials VHEMT, which stands for; Voluntary Human Extinction Movement – no kidding. It's a little over the top but the website is alive and kicking and maybe a little unnerving. The group advocates voluntarily un-procreating ourselves right out of existence, which I think would allow some other species the opportunity to over-populate and stress the planet, so you have to wonder what the point is.

Now assuming that we don't subscribe to the tenants of VHEMT, maybe we could look closer at the 'minimal waste' aspect. "The Story of Stuff" video by Annie Leonard certainly vilifies all manner of human manufacturing and maybe you can adopt an attitude of discipline where you do your part in reducing the overall demand for stuff in general. But there is no doubt that we are a throw-away society. It is a fact that certain economic incentives and manufacturing efficiencies dictate that it is cheaper to buy a new printer and discard the old one than it is to repair it.

But it seems that the only way to reorient this incentive and implement the author's 'repair' wish is by some sort of government mandate, assuming we collectively think that it needs to be done. And as mentioned before, stimulating the world economies to insure short term survival is currently taking precedence over reworking our cultures in the interest of 'green'.

The other subject of recycling packaging/containers versus reusing them in the context of minimal waste does involve more than just who has to collect, sort and transport the materials. Those activities have to take place regardless of who has to do it and whether the system is one of reuse or recycle. The acid test of what would be best for the environment would have to do with which process, in total, to re-employ the package is 'cleaner'; reusing or recycling. Minimizing the use of packaging does also seem to have merit too.

So, here was a case against recycling mostly because the author felt the burden of dealing with the materials was misplaced; it fell to the consumer whereas the manufacturer should be responsible. My issue with recycling is more along the lines of; does it have any net benefit to the environment? There is evidence to suggest that it does, although not in all cases – but that's for next month; in the meantime we'd better keep recycling those things where it makes sense to recycle if only we knew what they were.