

RECYCLING

Cutting consumption more effective than recycling

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If we care about climate change and protecting the environment, recycling is a worthwhile practice. There are things, however, that go beyond recycling that are much more effective and actually easier and more rewarding to do. To go beyond recycling we need to rethink how much consuming we do.

Because we are immersed in a high consumption culture, we do not realize quite how high our consumption actually is. Americans make up about 5 percent of the Earth's population, so one might think that would mean using 5 percent of global resources each year. Not true! We consume a staggering 30 percent, as well as producing 30 percent of total global pollution. Residents of France, Japan, Germany, Britain and Italy have an excellent quality of life, yet energy use per person is less than half of what it is in the United States.

Many people in nonindustrialized countries say they want to live the way we do, but in order for that to be possible, there would need to be three more planet Earths to provide the resources. Ironically, our way of life is not even making us happier. We have 4½ times as much wealth as our ancestors in 1900, and we consume at a level that is 50 percent more than Americans just 30 years ago, and yet research continually shows that we are not any happier as a result.

Paul Hawken has calculated that for every 100 pounds of product sitting on a retail shelf, an average of 3,200 pounds of waste that we never see is produced before it ever arrives in a store. In making products, resources first must be extracted from the Earth: petroleum to make plastics and synthetics, and ores mined and then smelted at high temperatures to make metal for components. These are highly polluting and energy intensive activities. Next comes product manufacture, packaging and multiple incidents of shipping. And all these processes require fossil fuel and release greenhouse gases.

Dealing with this problem at the deepest level involves choosing to reduce personal consumption. Consuming less is vastly more effective than recycling the containers those products come in and (eventually) the products themselves. In causing the creation of fewer

products, you are also greatly lowering the use of both energy and any resources that would have gone into those products (ores, trees, water, etc.).

More good news: Reducing consumption greatly improves the quality of one's life. Because we consume so much, we need to work longer hours. The average American today works 160 hours per year more than 30 years ago — that's four extra weeks of full-time work each year. If we stop wanting so much "stuff," we don't need to work as many hours, or we can afford to accept a more satisfying but lower paying job; and with a reduced need for income, we will be better able to weather difficult economic times — particularly important in today's world.

Green consumption helps, but green consumption is still consumption: It still produces large amounts of waste and it still takes large amounts of energy and other resources to produce a green computer, car or shirt. Ultimately, we must choose to lower overall personal consumption.

Here are some ideas for getting started. Avoid shopping as a form of recreation, or emotional therapy, or to be in fashion. Always ask: Why am I buying this? Is it tradition, duty, cheering myself up, habit or to fit in? If the underlying need is emotional, fill it emotionally instead of numbing it by buying another item.

Also, we can learn to distinguish real needs from wants. Marketers try to make us dissatisfied with what we have and create wanting for something new. We can recognize and reduce exposure to ad marketing techniques and stop comparing ourselves with others. And we can always remind ourselves of what we gain by buying less — less pressure to earn income, and a feeling that we are improving our world.

---This column is provided by Lane County Recycling. Dale Lugenbehl teaches philosophy at Lane Community College, as well as waste prevention classes for the Lane County Master Recyclers program.

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