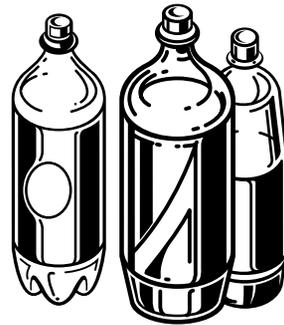


The Price of Quenching Our Thirst

In 2002, thirsty Americans consumed 189 billion sodas, juice drinks, and other beverages packaged in plastic or glass bottles and aluminum cans. That's over 650 containers per person per year—or almost two containers a day for every person living in the United States. Sadly, fewer than half of these bottles and cans were recycled; the majority were trashed—landfilled, burned, or littered along roads, beaches, parks, and other scenic places.

This is a huge amount of wasted resources: a quarter of a million tons of aluminum metal, a million and a half tons of plastic bottles, and nearly 7 million tons of glass bottles—and just for one year in the United States! On a global scale, the quantity of wasted containers—and their contribution to the world's trash burden—is mounting steadily as sales of throwaway beverages outstrip recycling efforts.

Most of us agree that litter is unsightly and expensive to clean up. But how many of us think about how much energy and material is used—and how many pollutants are generated—to manufacture the billions of new cans and bottles to replace the ones we don't recycle? Often, the impacts of this production are felt elsewhere. In Brazil, which exported about half of the 1.3 million tons of primary aluminum it produced in 2002, rivers and indigenous people in the Amazon basin are increasingly threatened by the development of new aluminum smelters.



DID YOU KNOW...?

- * People in the U.S. consume more packaged drinks per capita than in any other country—about 350 aluminum cans per person per year, compared to 103 in Sweden, 88 in the United Kingdom, and 14 in France.
- * In 2001, 285 million Americans failed to recycle some 51 billion cans—enough to encircle the Earth 153 times if laid end-to-end. (That same year, 451 million residents of 18 European nations wasted only 8.9 billion cans.)
- * Making 1 million tons of aluminum cans from virgin materials requires 5 million tons of bauxite ore and the energy equivalent of 32 million barrels of crude oil. Recycling the cans, in comparison, saves all of the bauxite and more than 75 percent of the energy, and avoids about 75 percent of the pollutants.
- * Recycling just one aluminum can saves enough electricity to run a laptop computer for 4 hours.
- * Making 1 million tons of plastic bottles from virgin materials (petroleum and other fossil fuels) generates an estimated 732,000 tons of climate-altering greenhouse gases.
- * Plastic bottles made from PET (polyethylene terephthalate) can be recycled into many products, including beverage bottles, plastic strapping, fleece jackets, sleeping bags, and carpets. Yet in 2002, less than a fifth of all plastic beverage bottles in the U.S. were recycled.
- * Recycling glass yields a 10 percent energy savings and preserves the life of the glass furnace. Yet currently, less than a third of glass bottles sold in the United States are recycled.

SUCCESS STORIES

- ❖ In 10 U.S. states, several Canadian provinces, and some countries in Europe and South America, consumers pay a deposit when they buy a beverage and are later refunded the full amount when they return the bottle or can for recycling. The state of Michigan achieves a 95 percent recycling rate with its 10¢ container deposit law, and Sweden achieves an 86 percent aluminum can recycling rate with its 50 öre deposit system. In India, high recycling rates are achieved by way of a deposit value equivalent to about 50 percent of the price of the beverage.
- ❖ At 87 percent, Brazil has one of the highest aluminum can recycling rates in the world. (The U.S. can recycling rate, in comparison, slipped from 65 percent in 1992 to 48 percent in 2002.) Aluminum can recycling in much of the developing world is not entirely cause for celebration, however, since low wages and poverty make collecting a necessity for thousands of people.

CHALLENGE YOURSELF AND OTHERS:

Form a coalition to advocate for a container deposit-return system in your province or state, either through the legislature or through voter referendum. This is much more effective than a one-time recycling event or awareness day, which ultimately does little to change the infrastructure of recycling.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- ☛ **Container Recycling Institute** (www.bottlebill.org and www.container-recycling.org) serves as a clearinghouse for bottle and can recycling information, and promotes deposit systems.
- ☛ **GrassRoots Recycling Network (GRRN)** (www.grrn.org) works to achieve the goal of “zero waste.” GRRN and the Institute for Local Self Reliance co-produced a report on the history of and prospects for refillable bottles, at www.grrn.org/beverage/refillables/index.html.
- ☛ **Tomra** (www.tomra.com) is an international purveyor of “reverse vending machines” and other beverage container recycling systems
- ☛ **Raymond Communications** (www.raymond.com) offers a subscriber service for information about recycling laws and policies around the world.



SIMPLE THINGS YOU CAN DO:

- ✓ Refill your water bottle at the tap rather than buying a new one.
- ✓ Buy large size containers (2 liters or 64 ounces) for juices, soda, and water, rather than single serving sizes.
- ✓ If you have a choice, buy beverages in refillable (rather than single use) recyclable bottles.
- ✓ Recycle! Use the deposit system, curbside recycling or drop-off programs, or recycling bins found in public places like malls or airports.
- ✓ If there's no recycling program in your workplace or apartment building, organize one!
- ✓ Advocate for legislation that favors refillable containers over single use ones.