Plastic Waste and China’s Ban on Importing our Garbage

Ban started in January - now starting to affect local communities as their waste disposal contracts renew.
Plastic is all around us. As I compose this document, I am sitting on a chair clad in plastic, tapping on a keyboard made primarily of plastic, and will print a final copy on a printer that is shielded by plastic. Plastic has been a godsend for manufacturers. An inexpensive, lightweight material, it has allowed consumer driven economy to grow on the model of replace and upgrade. The goods are sold in a protective layer of plastic. Your purchases are placed in a plastic bag. Plastic is all around us.

Plastic has been a hot topic in the news this year over China’s ban on plastic scrap imports. The EPA estimates that the US plastic recycling rate was only 9.1% in 2015. Even with this meager amount, China made plastic recycling programs work for the United States as our infrastructure to recycle plastics is totally insufficient to process even the most valued (i.e. the easiest to reuse) plastics. Just for reference, there is only one plastic recycler in New York State (UltrePET in Albany), and they primarily recycle #1 PET plastic. Would this business even be in New York without the bottle deposit law and the clean plastic sort provided by the bottle returns?

The 9.1% recycling number may be surprising to many, but think of how much plastic is thrown out. (Polystyrene, i.e. Styrofoam) and (miscellaneous) plastics are universally not accepted by local curbside collections. Single use, uncoded plastics, such as sandwich bags, straws, and plastic forks are not recyclable. Overwraps on bulk items, bags and wraps on prepackaged produce are generally not recyclable. Even if they have the recycling symbol on them, the only chance for the film to be recycled is

Author: John S Szalasny (on the Executive Committee of the Sierra Club Niagara Group)
recollectable. Even if they have the recycling symbol on them, the only chance for the film to be recycled is to take it to a bag collection bin at a store. If it (or plastic bags from the store) goes into your home recycling bin, it ends up as trash at the sorting center as it jams up the mechanical sorters, as well as it ends up soiled in the collection process.

Due to the plastic scrap import ban, the Plastic Pollution Coalition is estimating a 50% drop in plastic recycling for 2018, with a potential for a continued drop off in 2019 if other Asian countries follow China’s lead. According to the Wall Street Journal, “The U.S. recycling industry is breaking down. Prices for scrap paper and plastic have collapsed, leading local officials across the country to charge residents more to collect recyclables and send some to landfills. Used newspapers, cardboard boxes and plastic bottles are piling up at plants that can’t make a profit processing them for export or domestic markets.”

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As the marketability of plastic waste decreases, municipalities will be forced to decide whether to continue recycling programs. When current contracts end with waste management companies, what has been a small revenue stream will turn into a rate hike whether the municipality decides to continue with recycling or to landfill the unmarketable plastics.

“We lost our major market for potentially recycling lower grade plastics – we don’t have the infrastructure in the US.”
As bad as this picture looks today, the amount of plastics production is expected to triple worldwide by 2050. With the raw materials of plastic (natural gas and oil) at relatively low prices for the foreseeable future, recycled plastics will likely cost more than the cost of the new plastic. The economics make it unlikely that new plastic recycling centers will open, adding more waste to our overburdened landfills. Now that it is becoming increasingly clear that we can’t recycle our way out of the impending tsunami of plastic waste, governments will need to review their policies on the use and disposal of plastics as they have a huge environmental impact as plastics do not readily biodegrade (for example, the lifespan of a plastic water bottle is 450 years).

Suggestions include: Bans on Styrofoam containers, single use plastics, etc. Universal bottle deposits across the US. Encouraging decreased usage of packaging. Mandating all plastic be coded for recycling. Use a carbon tax on the petrochemicals used in plastics manufacturing to pay for recycling infrastructure. Utilize recycled plastics for road construction. Whatever is done, it needs to start now.

*Lead image: damoiselle*

Written by **BRo Guest Authors**

It’s not unusual for authors to come and go. Guest authors range from collegiate interns to writers who will be contributing for a short stint of time. Guest authors might also have a series in mind. Authors are encouraged to submit their ideas to BRO (Buffalo Rising Online), upon which time we will work with the writer towards a productive end.
The City of Buffalo’s recent 75% overnight increase in garbage fees should, in theory, produce higher recycling rates as homeowners and landlords reduce the size of their garbage totes in an effort to keep costs in line.

Or maybe it won’t—but at least the city will get more money from those who can least afford it!

We have incredible technology at our disposal. We need to push biodegradable and recycling and incinerating technologies further down the cost justification curve. We can do it. We are pushing renewable energy down the cost justification curve and both exhaustion of resources and pollution are far bigger problems.

Using gene technology to implant nitrogen fixing capabilities into our agricultural crops would eliminate the need for a large scale use of fertilizers which in turn create deadzones in our estuaries, wetlands, lakes, rivers, coastlines...etc.

Moving crops like lettuce into factories which can produce 4x the crop harvesting to crops planted in fields is another technology moving down the cost justification curve.
Louis Tully • an hour ago

The best thing for this planet is for us to be all gone.

ChristopherRobin • Louis Tully • an hour ago

It's true that overpopulation is the biggest problem on the planet. Pollution and desertification and extinction etc all come from over population but even here all western/westernized nations are depopulating and depopulating rapidly (we depopulating nations aren't the problem). The top3 most rapidly depopulating nations are Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. Excluding immigration, western/central/eastern europe and russia are all depopulating except for Poland and Hungary which recently banned abortion. South America and Mexico are stable or depopulating. It's the nations that are overpopulated, cannot support their population and are forcing their excess population onto other nations that will be a problem for the next 25-50 years. Last I heard the world population will not stabilize until 2050 but that just means depopulation will be balanced by over population. There will still be nations continuing to exceed the population they can support.

shmeagershcolin • ChristopherRobin • 39 minutes ago

Clear away that thicket of words, and the message is "black and brown people should stop reproducing."

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