



Zero Waste Institute

July 2010 Newsletter

A few years ago, the NY Times reported on a crisis in Naples, Italy. The dumps were closed and garbage was piling up in the streets, similar to crises in New York and other cities. Residents were screaming for something to be done. (See an extract of the story below).

But what was really the worst problem with the bags of garbage? It wasn't just the physical presence of a pile. As always, it was the stink of rotting food and the rodents, gulls and insects that were attracted to that. Then there are the criminal elements that always follow the garbage business. In Naples they have the original Mafia to worry about.

So what solution was being sought? Was there any analysis of a better way of dealing with the problem of human cities creating excess discards? Of course not! Garbage is considered a constant of nature, as natural as air or trees. The only solution is the usual non-solution - find a place to put it that will be out of sight. The article makes that plain.

And yet would those Neapolitans believe that there is actually an effective, workable, cheap and easy solution to much of the problem that has nothing to do with finding a dumpsite? Apparently not.

The problem that people are mostly reacting against is the presence of organic matter – mostly food – mixed in with the garbage. The wood and broken electronics don't cause smells or attract rodents. So the solution could not be simpler – remove the organic component.

Hundreds of studies of typical garbage collections by cities and the EPA have shown that organic matter typically constitutes about half of the weight of garbage. Imagine that! Half of the discards and most of the worst problems. And then, the real clincher, there is a much better way to manage the food part which creates a usable product that is needed to solve problems with growing new food. It's called composting and it takes organic inputs and makes a compost product that is clean, no longer smelly or attractive to pest species and it helps us

to maintain soil health and grow food. How could it get any better than that? Why in the world would anyone want to set up a garbage system that mixes organic matter in with rocks and old phonographs? Why would a society prefer to wallow in smelly, nasty problems rather than create clean and productive solutions? Why indeed! Yet this is what one society after another does with a vengeance. The resistance to common sense applied to discards is ferocious.

One clue, though not an answer to that question, is that just making a half-hearted effort is not enough. The need is for ALL organic matter to be removed from garbage. Even getting ninety percent moved into compost piles will still leave the ten percent to create smelly, nasty problems. And it will still create methane in dumps and will still contaminate the inert components as it rots.

Getting ALL of the organic matter out is a problem though. What it would require is that people take up a level of responsibility for what and how they discard unwanted excesses that they are historically unwilling to take on. The very essence of garbage discard is irresponsibility and this is a lazy practice that has tendrils in every aspect of social life. While some, or even many, might embrace a heightened responsibility for their impact on the planet, there are always others ready to throw a wooden shoe into the gears, or, in this case, determined to throw a rotten potato in with the rest of their garbage. They may rail at California fruitcakes or those damned liberals but irresponsible discard is their right goddammit and don't tell them otherwise. A society does not take responsibility for their actions until they are forced to. The only way to convince everyone that organic matter is completely unacceptable outside of new, compost directed channels, would be to actually refuse to accept any garbage from anyone that included any organic matter whatsoever. This would never be possible in today's society, still awash in the irresponsible behavior of ten thousand years of common usage. The garbage companies would holler loudly and the politicians would join in. Soon the freedom to destroy the planet would be cited and then you are into ideology and politics and nothing else moves. Don't we still hear grumbles from smokers (in California) that they have a right to contaminate our air if they choose to?

No, the crisis isn't bad enough yet. Let's close some more dumps, let's pile garbage in every city in the world, let's make sure it smells and bubbles and is enveloped in clouds of mosquitoes and seagulls and rats, let's make life unbearable in all our cities and then maybe, just maybe, politicians will be willing to listen to solutions to the problem.

Don't hold your breath!

THE GUSHER IN THE GULF

The oil gushing out of the seafloor in the Gulf of Mexico is the biggest environmental news of the past decade. Does this disaster have any lessons for the progress of Zero Waste thinking? As a matter of fact, it does.

Cleanup. Doesn't work! Spreading oil into the environment is sooooo much easier than removing it (the reason is entropy). It's the same for chemicals. Superfund cleanups don't work any better than cleaning oil from birds' feathers. The only way to keep the environment clean is to eliminate spills and discard in the first place.

Out of sight. The Correxite dispersant is a way of hiding the oil away from the surface where it could be seen. The back story of all pollution is to hide it where the public won't see it. That is exactly what a garbage dump is. A big hole in the ground where the public won't find the pollution until it's too late.

Dispersant. There is no government study of dispersants that objectively prepares for its use in various environments. Where is the university study of deep water drilling? All that is left is bellyaching and relying on the same industry that causes the problems. Zero Waste analysis teaches that our research establishments need to be studying everything that might lead to any kind of discard and finding ways to eliminate discard before it can happen.

Last month's newsletter Remember, it was about capturing tantalum from electrolytic capacitors.

Since then, the battle over importing tantalum from the Congo heated up. Calling coltan, tantalum and tungsten "conflict minerals", the group called **Enough** finally got Congress to pass a law restricting imports of conflict minerals from Congo and President Obama signed it. Someday the other shoe will drop and they will figure out that they are shooting themselves in the foot by discarding tantalum as fast as it can be mined. Sigh

Just put Conflict Minerals into Google to read more.



Naples Journal In Mire of Politics and the Mafia, Garbage Reigns

Salvatore Laporta/Associated Press

All but one of the Naples garbage dumps are closed, and residents' anger rises as fast as the smelly mounds.

By [IAN FISHER](#), *New York Times*
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For a dozen years, Naples and surrounding towns like this one have periodically choked on their refuse, but the last two weeks have flared into a real crisis, as

much political as sanitary: trash began piling high in the streets as places to dump it officially filled up. Then, on Saturday, the last legal dump closed.

As the piles rose and the stench spread, 100 or more refuse fires burned some nights — one of many trash-related protests that included, inevitably, mothers clutching rosaries on railroad tracks. And while a patchwork of emergency measures has eased the crisis in the past few days, even the beleaguered men whose job it is to collect the trash sympathized.

The problems around Naples, a city long defined by both its loveliness and its squalor, are complicated, raising worries about tourism, inequity in southern Italy and the local mafia, the Camorra.

But put simply, the bottom line seems the failure of politics, never a strong point here.

As trash dumps filled over the years, it proved impossible to find new places or ways to get rid of garbage, creating as much stink as unsightliness, largely because of local protests or protection by one politician or another. But years of postponing the problem finally caught up with Naples (and by bad luck just as the temperature rose).

"It's never been like this — I can't tell you why," said Sabato D'Aria, 37, owner of a small grocery nearby.

Politicians, he said, only "talk, talk, talk, but in the end you see very little."

There is also the problem of the Camorra, which profits extraordinarily in the endless crisis over trash, much as arms dealers thrive in war.

So the question remains whether Naples is really ready to overcome its trash crisis, whether politicians can finally agree where new dumps and incinerators should be located. (Shipping garbage abroad does not seem to be an option: Romania, one of the few possibilities, recently said it would not take Italy's trash.)

If difficult decisions are not made — and quickly — nearly everyone fears that trash will begin piling up again, with still more fires, anger and questions about how this can still happen in Europe.

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