



ZERO WASTE INSTITUTE NEWSLETTER

September 2010

Above: winner of a recent mustache contest

The subject for this month is the deceptive program called “e-waste recycling”.

What’s that you say? You’ve read about this disaster in China and Ghana? No, I’m not referring to that at all. I’m referring to the grand deception practiced in the USA by environmental groups that are more interested in their public relations and their support for garbage creation than their stewardship of the planet.

There is a program for “collecting e-waste” in this country and it is fostered by local governments that rely on a shared, cultural, assumption that garbage is universal and must be accepted for all time. Since it is always more acceptable to act in synchrony **with** cultural assumptions, rather than **against** them, many environmental groups have adopted convenient and profitable notions built around processing electronic goods into various forms of garbage, while making a great show of recovery or refurbishing.

As soon as you read “e-waste” you know something is wrong. If you are concerned with saving planetary resources, which must be done by reuse, why would you emphasize the status of products as “waste”? Why would you adopt the terms of the garbage industry suggesting that all unwanted goods are useless bits of trash, destined soon for the dump or incinerator? Why would you want to cede control of the subject to those who are hell-bent on destroying the planet by over-consumption followed by easy discard? Yet this is the uninformed approach so beloved of the recyclers. There are much better ways to approach the basic problem which do not imply such negatives. Let’s ask ourselves how we can design systems for dealing with “*expired or unwanted electronic goods*”. That’s at least a neutral and correctly descriptive term. Leave terms that end with “waste” to the despoilers of the planet.

I assume you have all heard ad nauseum about the villages in China and Africa where old electronics are burned in large smoking piles to extract the valuable metals; where children and adults are contaminated and made ill for desperately needed income. Sounds awful doesn’t it? But let’s ask how to frame the core

objection to these activities. When you think about it, the objection is made to what is being done with the expired goods. The message is that it is not acceptable to burn them in the open air, even if this is the best process that poor villagers can devise to recover value.

So if we are to design a better, more civilized, more acceptable approach to recovery or reuse, you would expect that our core task is to devise a better way to treat the expired goods.

In this country, certain environmental groups are strongly urging their own versions of what they call “e-waste recycling”. One of the most prominent is the Basel Action Network. And in fact, they are the ones most active in bringing forward the pictures and videos from China and Africa. So let’s see what these groups, and the local governments who are passing legislation to support their views of the world, are putting forward as a better way to treat the expired goods.

Some of their programs and writings are noted in the references at the end. I’ve searched tons of their plans, programs and campaigns and *there isn’t any such discussion*. Actually they don’t have, or want to reveal, any better way to treat the expired goods. It seems they don’t care much about that aspect of their plans.

No, the plans you can read about in the attached documents are managerial, or bureaucratic or political plans. Actual physical operations aren’t mentioned. What are mentioned in excruciating detail are these:

- Specifics of legislation
- Names of collectors of e-waste
- Fees charged by collectors
- Schedules of collections
- Special collection events (such as by Boy Scouts)
- Times and locations of collections
- Economics of e-waste collection
- The separation of different types of goods
- The refurbishing or resale of usable pieces
- The risk to employees who handle e-waste
- “Proper” disposal of hazardous components
- The amounts of lead recycled
- New recycling jobs created
- Manufacturer financing
- Public approval

I don’t see any reference to what is actually done with the goods. Wasn’t that the whole point? To do better than the Chinese and African villagers? Apparently the whole point of the program was to control the *collection*, leading to control of the *subsidies and fees*. Could the real point be to *manage the profits*?

The reference to reuse and refurbishing may appear to concern an actual operation on the goods, but whenever the garbage industry lays its heavy thumb on the scale, beware the price. In fact, there was a relatively thriving Refurbisher Industry that was clawing its way up the ladder of acceptance and respectability before any of this e-waste legislation came along. Refurbishing under the best of conditions is not very profitable because *these goods are designed for a short life*

followed by discard but the fate of the computers they did manage to repair was transparent and socially beneficial. Thousands of computers were donated to schools and charities every month. Microsoft even provided a cheap operating system to help them out. The industry sponsors an annual conference. But this new e-waste legislation has marginalized the refurbishers. Now the states have stepped in and mandated the primacy of collection over everything else. Had the refurbishers been put at the front of the line for subsidies and support, the incentives that followed might have been for designs for reuse, a Zero Waste program. But with mere collection given pride of place, the designs will all be for efficient discard, collection, destruction, capture of a few major materials like copper, gold and leaded glass, and destruction of everything else. In the context of reuse, collection is trivial because it is a garbage inspired concern. What should really count is changing design in the direction of easy reuse.

CERTIFICATION

Certification is the elephant in the room. One after another, various groups have sprung forward for a piece of the tasty pie that has been baking in the public arena with the campaign against export of electronic goods to other countries. These are the certifiers, who propose to set up standards that an industry must follow. If they do their job well, they can swing an industry into a productive channel. Some certify the use of natural products, such as the Marine Stewardship Council which certifies fisheries or the Forest Stewardship Council that certifies logging and forest management. The International Standards Organization (ISO) certifies general business practices. And sure enough there are a few that certify recycling practices, especially for electronic goods.

One of these is the e-Stewards Council, which advertises itself as The Globally Responsible Way To Recycle Your Electronics. Surely these people are here to make sure that recycling operations are fine tuned for the health of the planet. Or are they? Here is an excerpt from their home page:

Certified e-Stewards recyclers adhere to the e-Stewards Standard for Responsible Recycling and Reuse of Electronic Equipment®; written by the environmental community with leaders in the industry to protect human health and the global environment. While there are other guidelines written for the recycling industry, the e-Stewards Standard is the only e-waste standard that:

- *Requires a certified ISO 14001 environmental management system that builds in occupational health and safety requirements specific to the electronics recycling industry, minimizing exposure of recycling workers to hazards*
- *Prohibits all toxic waste from being disposed of in solid waste landfills and incinerators*
- *Requires full compliance with existing international hazardous waste treaties for exports and imports of electronics, and specifically prohibits the export of hazardous waste from developed to developing countries*

- *Prohibits the use of prison labor in the recycling of toxic electronics, which often have sensitive data embedded*
- *Requires extensive baseline protections for and monitoring of recycling workers in every country, including developed nations where toxic exposures are routinely taking place*
- *Is written for international use*

You get the flavor of the gum they are chewing. If there is any conventional, mom and apple pie buzz word they cover it. Toxic this and that, employees, social justice, hazardous waste, international use, prison labor etc. You can look over the rest of their documentation and you'll find the same beat going on. The one thing you will not find is any description of **what the hell happens to the stuff.**

In my humble opinion, this is no accident. Our ancestors observed already that you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. If you design an entire product line to be used for a short time, then be obsoleted and discarded, there is no way you are going to do anything with it after it no longer does the job you needed it for, except somehow discard it, then destroy it. The things are not made to be reusable! You may hate to waste anything, you may desperately strive to make no garbage at all but you are out of luck. The very best you can do, and it's not much, is to reduce everything to its lowest common denominator, the barest of bare materials, put them into different bins and hope to melt down or grind up each material in some desperate form of reuse. As for the real inherent value of your goods, the high function that each one was painstakingly assembled for, it's gone. All the work that went into designing and financing and molding and creating and assembling and testing ---- all gone and has to be done over. What a waste!

That is why you can search up and down to the far reaches of the e-waste legislation, the certifications, the fancy stories about how much better it will be done here than in China and Africa, and at the end of the day, your fine words will butter no parsnips.. The mentality that talks about e-waste is the same mentality that sees the world in terms of consumer waste and hazardous waste and nuclear waste and green waste and medical waste etc. Once you decree that your public attitude, your laws and regulations are going to be about WASTE, you are talking the talk of GARBAGE and you are not going to be saving the planet but trashing it. This is where those plastic gyres and those depleted fisheries and vanishing species come from. Because we as a culture really don't give enough of a damn whether the planet is exhausted or not.

Join me at the Zero Waste Institute and give a damn. Go to a public meeting in your community and explain that recycling is not the answer. Shake up the reigning mentality of discard. Stop all this talk of merely collecting discards and make them talk about how they are going to design for using functions over and over and over. Nothing else will work.

Do you know anyone who should be getting this newsletter? Please send me their email address to add to the distribution list.

Do you have examples of successful Zero Waste approaches? Let me know and let's put them into a future newsletter.

Paul Palmer, Director
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References:

Certification: <http://e-stewards.org/certification-overview/>

Washington and Oregon e-waste programs: http://zerowasteinstitute.org/?page_id=1429

Battery recycling collections: <http://mycall2recycle.com/>

Seeking certification: <http://www.wasterecyclingnews.com/email.html?id=1284995216>

Chinese recycling: http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1870162_1822148,00.html

The Zero Waste way to reuse CRT's: http://zerowasteinstitute.org/?page_id=154