

Zero Waste Institute Newsletter for March 2012

A recent article in Waste and Recycling News reported:

100 tons of trash left behind from Rose Bowl festivities

Jan. 6 -- More than 100 tons of trash was left behind after the Rose Parade and Rose Bowl football game in Pasadena, Calif., on Jan. 2, 2012.

So what? 80 trash collecting sanitation workers cleaned it all up by the next day. Who cares?

Precisely! Who cares?

Somewhere over a million people are estimated to have attended, leaving an average of a pound of trash for every five people. Let's say roughly two aluminum cans and a cardboard container for fries or slushy for each person. Thrown onto the ground. All million of them – on the ground. There must be a few who are outdoors people or campers who don't litter so their contribution was made up by even more litter from the rest. They think it's okay. The sanitation workers think it's okay. The newspaper thinks it's okay. Americans think it's okay.

It's not just Americans though. I've been in other places where litter is perfectly acceptable too. In Macedonia, I went down to the river on a summer's day for relief from the heat. Hundreds of people were there at the river beach. A number had driven their cars into the river and were washing the cars, leaking oil and all, in the river. The watermelon rinds and bottles so littered the beach that you could barely walk. Not so much paper and aluminum back then.



Costa Rica Festival

I stumbled across a festival site in Costa Rica when the musicians were packing up. I could not believe the scene. It looked like the Rose Bowl parade sounds like. In Costa Rica without a native plastics producing industry, the litter consisted mostly of paper, plastic films and plastic soda bottles. No glass or cans.

So what do all of these places have in common? A garbage industry ready to come along after the litterbugs and “clean” it up. What does “clean up” mean? The same thing it always means. Put the unwanted detritus somewhere else where it won't be visible every day when someone with visual sensitivity passes by. Usually an underground pit serves nicely. Out of sight out of mind was never truer. This is what it means when cleaning up bromobenzene or DDT or Hungarian red mud or radioactive fuel rods. The earth is penetrated with one more hole that no one wants to look at.

What if we woke up one bright, wonderful morning, the sun was shining, the birds were singing, the spring was sprung, and there was no garbage collector anywhere in the world, no sweepers, no garbage truck, no garbage companies, no juicy garbage contracts and no dumps. Join with John Lennon and just imagine it.

Would people suddenly know to take all of their trash home with them? No, I don't think so. You see, in my imagination, I don't see a world built on the same trashy basis but done a little bit better. I see something far better. I see a world where people are no longer taught to be selfish and wasteful and ignore the health of the one planet they have to live on. I see a Zero Waste world where there is no longer any reason for throwing goods away onto the ground because there aren't any such goods. I see a future where people take responsibility for their own reuse so they have their own containers for everything and those containers go home with them, they get washed out, put into a cabinet and they come out the next time they are needed. No more producing crap to be discarded onto the ground or into a blue plastic bin for someone else to cynically pretend to take care of. And the same kind of attitude toward everything they use – refrigerators, boxes, basketballs and computers. Responsibility is a wonderful concept. Just imagine!

(And, sorry, I just had to say it. No recycling either! Imagine that!)

A few years ago I read a report by a Japanese environmentally aware enthusiast for rock and roll. He wrote an article about a concert he went to. Mick Jagger banged away on his guitar and the people jumped up and down and they drank their beer and smoked cigarettes and sat on tarps and a wonderful time was had by all. Then they got up and went home. All the beer and soda containers went with them. All the paper went into paper bins by the front gate. The smokers carried little butt holders that hung around their necks to hold all of their cigarette butts. When the crowd has left, there was a green field. The grass was a bit trampled but there was not a piece of litter anywhere.

Responsible citizens! It could happen! Just imagine!

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