Recycling: What's Going On Beyond the Bin?

July 8, 2022

We all know the "Three Rs": Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. For most of us, this iconic message has been drilled into our brains since primary school. Take shorter showers. Print double-sided. Recycle your empties. Easy peasy lemon squeezy.

The third "R," recycling, is a beloved institution that has empowered billions of people to take action every day for the environment. No matter how involved you are in climate action, chances are you've probably recycled *something* in your life. But for as widespread and ingrained into society as recycling is, it is generally speaking not well-understood by most what happens to our waste beyond the recycling bin.

And that is problematic because the recycling system cannot keep up with the increasing amounts of waste we are throwing at it. Over time, we've become too reliant on recycling as a solution for dealing with our waste after the fact, and haven't made enough strides in reducing how much waste we create in the first place.

Recycling requires a rethink, and that starts with understanding what recycling actually is, what it isn't, and how it fits into the bigger picture of waste management and the economy.

There is no waste in nature

For most people alive today, municipal recycling programmes have simply always existed. And uptake is high; a survey conducted in 2021 by climate action NGO WRAP revealed that nearly 9 out of 10 UK households report regularly recycling their household waste.

But recycling as we know it has not always been around. While there is evidence of recycling-like actions having taken place in ancient societies, modern-day curbside recycling didn't begin to take shape until the 1970s when the environmental movement began.

Nor is recycling a perfect system. Consider for a moment that there is no such thing as waste in nature. There are only fine-tuned food chains whereby everything is food for something else. A fundamental problem with our modern lifestyle is that we've created a mind-boggling quantity of material that cannot feed another process. We invented the very concept of waste, and we did so without having a solution to manage it at the ready.

Recycling was our first attempt to recover value from waste and curb pollution. However, in the year 2000, only 12% of municipal waste was recycled in England and Wales. Fortunately, legislation passed in the UK in 2003 paved the way for a greatly improved recycling rate of 43% in 2016.

But disturbing reports emerged in 2021 again shaking our confidence in the entire recycling system: British plastic waste exported to Turkey for recycling was found to be dumped, burned, and left in nature.

Through the (recycled) looking glass

While the universal recycling symbol suggests that recycled materials circulate endlessly, keeping out of landfill and enjoying several lives, most materials can only recirculate a handful of times, if they even get recycled at all. The number of times a material can be recycled and reused ultimately comes down to what the material is (for example paper, plastic, etc.).

What's more, our use of the word "recycling" as a catch-all term for processing waste obscures that there are several ways in which waste can be processed for reuse, including upcycling, infinite recycling, and downcycling. This matters, because not all recycling methods are equal in terms of the value they give back.

Recycling as we know it in the UK is in reality most often what's called "downcycling." This is when waste is turned into something less valuable than the original materials. For example, plastic degrades significantly when processed resulting in lesser-quality plastic. Due to an explosion in demand for sustainable clothing, plastic waste is increasingly being downcycled into "recycled" polyester, reports The Guardian.

At first, this may seem like value is being added back into the equation. In the article, however, an employee from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation explains why limitations in technology mean that's not the case: "As it is today, bottles that have been turned into garments are no longer recyclable." In other words, downcycling provides diminishing returns.

On the other hand, infinite recycling is when the value of a material is held constant during the recycling process. Aluminium and glass are rare examples of materials that can be infinitely recycled without any loss of quality.

And last but not least, upcycling is the reuse of waste material in a way that creates something *more valuable* than the original material. Turning waste recovered from the fruit juice industry into vegan leather for ethical accessories which we stock here is the perfect example.

Is there another way?

Recent government statistics show that in 2018, the UK generated 222.2 million tonnes of total waste. And in 2020, the recycling rate for household waste in the UK was still less than 50%. It would be reasonable, then, to put two and two together that the vast amounts of waste we produce every year are outpacing the recycling system.

If the solution were as simple as everyone wasting less or recycling more, we would have solved the waste dilemma a long time ago. Shifting from a "take-make-waste" economy to a circular economy in which waste is eliminated, materials circulate at their highest value for as long as possible, and nature is regenerated will require action from businesses, governments, and individuals. No one group can do it alone.

One of the best ways we can reduce our waste right now is to use existing materials for longer before turning them over for downcycling. While there are multiple ways of going about this, from repairing items when they break to buying for life to begin with, upcycling is extraordinary in that it simultaneously increases value, prolongs the life of materials, and conserves resources. The upcycled products you can find on The Upcycling Market design out waste by designing with it.

Upcycling, recycling, and even downcycling all have their place in a circular economy. Taking a step back and viewing the bigger picture will help us get there.

Tags: **CIRCULAR ECONOMY** **EDUCATION** **UPCYCLING**