

Recycling report

Aussies are keen recyclers, but how good are we really at doing the right thing?

Erica Harrison investigates.

Australians are renowned for their rubbish. Last year we chucked out more than 43.8 million tonnes of stuff, according to government figures. This means that for every one of us, some two tonnes of trash is created each year, the equivalent of more than 1,000 sheets of office paper every day.

We tend to think of ourselves as good recyclers – after all, most of us take the time to sort our paper, plastic and glass into the council's coloured bins. So it might surprise you to learn that about half of the waste we create still ends up languishing in landfill.

According to Brad Gray, campaigns manager at Planet Ark, 90 per cent of Australians who have access to recycling facilities use them. "Recycling is by far and away the biggest voluntary activity undertaken by Australians on behalf of the environment."

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So where are we going wrong? Part of the problem, says Gray, is an information gap – a 2005 Planet Ark report found that almost 50 per cent of people were confused about what can and can't be recycled. It's hardly surprising then, that a whopping two million tonnes of recyclable material is lost to landfill every year because of contamination.

WHAT WE DO NOT RECYCLE

After the recycling truck visits your home, first stop is a materials recovery facility (MRF) where recyclables are sorted – and it turns out that the single biggest contaminant is the plastic bag.

As Tony Gray, director of sustainability at Visy, Australia's largest recycling company, explains, some people package their recyclables in the same way they dispose of their rubbish – in bags. These bags get tangled in sorting machinery or they're treated as waste and sent to landfill, along with the recyclables inside.

Non-recyclable glass is another common contaminant. A 2007 Planet Ark report found that of all materials, glass is what confuses people the most when it comes to recycling. In fact, 80 per cent of those surveyed thought a broken wine glass could be recycled.

Unfortunately, it doesn't take much non-recyclable glass to contaminate a load – a coin-sized piece of wine glass, window, light bulb or mirror can send a whole tonne of recyclable glass to landfill, where it will never be reused.

Certain items like compact fluorescent light bulbs, batteries and chemical containers must always be dropped off at collection centres for recycling.

Regional differences in what is accepted for recycling can add to the confusion. In some areas, items like soy milk cartons, margarine tubs and yoghurt containers can't be collected through kerbside schemes.



WHAT WE DO RECYCLE

The paper, plastic, glass, metal and other materials recovered at MRFs are sold to recycling companies for further processing into new products. So how much are we actually recycling?

Paper

According to David West, national campaign director for the Boomerang Alliance, a waste consultancy group, Australians are the best recyclers of newspapers and magazines in the world, with 75 per cent recovered.

The figures are much less impressive, however, when we take all paper products into account, including office paper and cardboard packaging. Of the 9.5 million tonnes we consume in paper each year, only 3.9 million tonnes – or just over 40 per cent – ends up recycled.

This is largely because of our poor recycling habits at work, where almost nine out of every 10 sheets of office paper are thrown away. As Planet Ark's Gray points out, since recycling is free at home, businesses can be reluctant to pay for the service.

Plastic

Of the 1.7 million tonnes of plastic that is consumed by Australians each year, only 260,000 tonnes – or 15 per cent of it – is recycled.

This low recovery rate results partly from the limited services available – while some 40 different types of plastics are used in manufacturing, only around 20 per cent of these are commonly recycled.

A Plastics Identification Code number is stamped on all plastic products to identify the type of resin used (see 'Recycling by the numbers', G22, p17). To find out which plastics can be recycled in your area, contact your local council.

Aluminium and steel cans

Aluminium cans are recycled at a higher rate than any other type of packaging in Australia. Of the 50,000 tonnes we consume each year, some 36,000 tonnes – or 72 per cent – are recycled, a lot of this thanks to South Australia's container deposit system. By comparison, our recovery rate for steel cans is lagging a fair bit behind at 37 per cent, with 92,000 tonnes used and 34,000 recycled.

» Organic waste

Australians create about 8.7 million tonnes of food and garden waste each year, of which about 45 per cent is reused. The material recovered is mostly used as compost or mulch around the home, with some garden waste being collected by kerbside services.

In fact, 'organic' refers to anything of plant or animal origin, and includes not only food and garden waste, but materials like sewage, paper and wood. Under this broader definition, a massive 62 per cent of all waste sent to landfill can be considered organic – a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions.

When organic waste decomposes in landfill, it releases methane gas, which warms the Earth with a potency 25 times that of CO₂. In fact, landfill gas can be captured and reused in energy generation, and, in late 2009, the Federal Government identified reductions in organic waste and capture of landfill gas as two key priorities in its new national policy on waste management (for more information, see www.environment.gov.au/settlements/waste).

Glass

Australians use about 893,000 tonnes of bottles and jars each year, and recycle about 340,000 tonnes – or 38 per cent. According to Terrie-Ann Johnson, chief executive of Clean Up Australia, this recovery rate could be dramatically improved by the provision of better recycling services in public places.

About half of our drink containers – bottles and cans – are used at food outlets, shopping centres, entertainment and sporting venues, or at the beach or park. While our kerbside services are good, says Johnson, services are often limited and confusing when we're away from home and recycling bins aren't there.



STATE AGAINST STATE

Which Australians come out tops?

Of all Australia's states and territories, the Australian Capital Territory scores the highest marks for recycling, with a 74 per cent recovery rate, according to a 2008 government report. South Australia and Victoria also scored well, with rates of 68 and 62 per cent – well above the national average of 49 per cent.

While no data was available for Tasmania or for the Northern Territory, the dunce cap went to Western Australia, with its 33 per cent recycling rate. Queensland and New South Wales also scored below the national average, with rates of 44 and 46 per cent respectively.

As Brad Gray from Planet Ark points out, the ACT is relatively small, and recycling is coordinated by its single government. Compare that with the vast distances and numerous local governments in WA – which makes recycling expensive and difficult to coordinate – and it's no wonder such dramatic differences arise.

Johnson attributes much of South Australia's success to the container deposit scheme introduced in 1975. Under this scheme, people are refunded 10 cents for every bottle or can they return to a collection centre.

According to the South Australian government, their state's return rate for containers is around 80 per cent – far higher than in any other state or territory. As Johnson says, "The container deposit scheme gives people an incentive to recycle. Every container has value – it's no longer rubbish."

Green

Shop smart. Look for products in minimal, easy-to-recycle packaging (that's recycled itself where possible).

Greener

If you're out and about and can't see a recycling bin, take recyclables home with you to your own bin.

Greenest

Be vocal. Lobby your local council or shopping centre for public recycling bins, as well as your workplace.

GLOBAL SCORE

How does Australia's recycling performance stack up internationally?

According to Brad Gray, campaigns manager at Planet Ark, we rank somewhere in the middle of the field compared to other OECD countries.

In a 2008 government report, Germany was way ahead, recycling 61 per cent of its waste compared to our 38 per cent. Still, we beat the United States, England and Canada, with rates of 33, 31 and 29 per cent respectively.

"It is, generally speaking, systemic issues that lead to these big differences," says Gray. He points out that Germany has had a socialist-green coalition in government for almost a decade. "So obviously you're going to have better, more coordinated recycling processes than in a country like Australia where our household recycling is taken care of at a local government level."

According to Johnson of Clean Up Australia, the higher density of living in countries like Germany and Japan is also significant. "There's heightened awareness of the fact that they don't have any space for landfill," she says. "So it's just second nature for people to sort and recycle wherever they are."

Electronic waste

This category, including discarded computers, televisions and mobile phones, is growing at more than three times the rate of other household rubbish, according to government figures.

In 2008, about 17 million TVs and computers reached the end of their lives nationwide, with 25,000 tonnes ending up in landfill. Only 10 per cent were recycled, mostly thanks to people taking equipment to companies that refurbish or reuse old computers.

Televisions and computers contain highly valuable resources – such as tin, zinc and copper – as well as hazardous materials like mercury and lead. Sending these products to landfill means the resources they contain are lost, and the nasty toxins might be released into the environment.

Despite the obvious benefits, the high costs involved in dismantling these products has so far discouraged commercial interest in recycling them. To address this problem, the Federal Government announced plans in late

2009 to develop product stewardship legislation for computers and TVs as part of its new national policy on waste management; manufacturers and importers will organise and fund recycling schemes for their products, while consumers will be responsible for dropping off their e-waste at collection points.

The Government expects the scheme to begin by 2011. In the meantime, we can reduce e-waste by finding new owners for our old working TVs and computers, by buying more durable products and by waiting longer before we upgrade.

THE FUTURE

The good news is that Australia's recycling rates are on the rise. The bad news is that so are our levels of consumption and waste production. So where to from here?

On an individual level we can not only improve our performance as recyclers but our commitment to the other two Rs, reusing and reducing. "We're still grossly over consuming," says Johnson. "Every one of us has a responsibility to think about the goods that we're buying in the first place."



She thinks governments need to offer more incentives like the container deposit schemes, and introduce legislation to ensure products are packaged responsibly. Schemes that make manufacturers responsible for their products at the end of their lives could also dramatically lower the amount of waste we create. Many European nations have programs like this in place, but Australia is lagging.

In a 2009 Boomerang Alliance survey, 75 per cent of people identified an emissions trading scheme as an important issue – recycling was important to 96 per cent. "There is no issue that has greater public support environmentally than waste and recycling," says West. It seems we have the will to be better recyclers – let's hope we find the way. **G**

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