

Eco-Tip for 8-4-19

Contrasting European and American Recycling

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On vacation in Europe over the past two weeks, I photographed some amazing sights. As my pictures show, even in crowded cities where cars line up for parking spaces, city planners have cordoned off extensive curbside space for the exclusive use of recycling collection.

Such devotion to recycling, at the expense of frustrated motorists, might spark an anti-recycling revolution in America. Instead, at least in the cities of Rome, Genoa, Gibraltar, Barcelona, and Marseilles, people carry their recyclables from multi-family buildings down the block to their nearest cluster of containers, and there they separate items by material type. Locals in the four countries containing those cities told me this form of communal curbside drop-off recycling became widespread throughout urban areas of western Europe in the 1990s, and no one questions it anymore.

While this residential recycling was remarkable, the extent of sacrifice for the sake of commercial recycling was even more worthy of photographic documentation to show my beleaguered colleagues who organize American recycling programs. In California over the past several years, complaints from neighbors and other challenges have resulted in the closure of thousands of recycling buyback centers in supermarket parking lots. In contrast, in the crowded European cities I toured, where markets have no parking lots, floor space of publicly accessible areas inside the store is allocated not just for bottle and can recycling, but also for separate collection of compostable material.

In fact, California has mandates requiring more recycling. For example, if a buyback recycling center is not within a half-mile radius, large retailers of drinks packaged in California Redemption Value containers must either pay for empty containers in the store or pay \$100 per day to the California Department of Resources Recovery and Recycling, according to Assembly Bill 2020, which passed in 1989. More comprehensive in the scope of businesses covered by a recycling mandate, Assembly Bill 1826 of 2014 requires separate collection of compostable materials from any business generating four or more cubic yards of any kind of solid waste per week.

However, neither of these mandates is enforced. The requirement for bottle and can redemption by stores was the subject early this year of a report by Consumer Watchdog, a non-profit group, saying this lack of enforcement contributed to Californians' loss of \$308 million in deposits last year and a decline in bottle and can recycling from 85 percent in 2013 to 75 percent in 2018.

The mandate for collection of compostables is on hold pending the availability of facilities capable of doing the necessary composting.

Landfill availability is one reason for the difference between European and American recycling. A report issued this week by the Ventura County Integrated Waste Management Division reported more than 50 years of disposal capacity at the two landfills in Ventura County, given current rates of filling.

In contrast, many of these European cities are experiencing disposal crises, making alternatives to disposal more urgent. Rome, for example, closed its Malagrotta landfill, previously the largest in Europe, six years ago and now has to send garbage long distances for disposal. Gibraltar, a British territory on Europe's Mediterranean coast, planned in 2001 to build a waste-to-energy facility, but they found the project cost prohibitive and technically questionable. Instead the territory continues to export all discards to Spain, which allows trash imports for now, although some question whether Spain will continue cooperation after Britain exits the European Union.

American landfill capacity, in contrast to European disposal crises, should not lead us to complacency about recycling. The best reasons for recycling have nothing to do with landfill capacity.

Rather than saving landfills, the main purpose of recycling is to save resources. Recycling conserves energy and raw materials for future generations and also cuts pollution in manufacturing processes. For example, the National Institutes for Health (NIH) website reports "Recycling steel saves 60% of production energy, recycled newsprint 40%, recycled plastics 70%, and recycled glass 40%."

Another major benefit of recycling is economic development. Also according to the NIH, "Incinerating 10,000 tons of waste creates 1 job, while landfilling the same amount creates 6 jobs. Recycling the same 10,000 tons creates 36 jobs." As long as the cost of recycling is similar to or less than the cost of the other options, recycling as a waste management option is therefore at least six times more efficient at recirculating those funds in the economy in the form of wages.

More information:

<https://nems.nih.gov/environmental-programs/Pages/Benefits-of-Recycling.aspx>