



Waste in the Environment

Irresponsible use of resources and disposal of waste into the environment contribute to environmental degradation. This degradation has implications on human health, the economy, food production, tourism, flora and fauna.

Our quality of life can only improve if attention is paid to caring for the environment we all share by using resources wisely and preventing unnecessary waste.

Did you know?

- Every year 32 billion cigarette butts are discarded. If these butts were lined up they would circle the world 23 times.
- Some 25% of all preventable illnesses are directly caused by environmental factors.
- Plastic kills up to 1 million seabirds, 100,000 sea mammals and countless fish worldwide each year.
- How long waste lasts in the environment:
 - Cotton rags – up to 1 year
 - Orange and banana peel – up to 2 years
 - Cigarette butts – 1 to 15 years
 - Plastic bags – 10 to 20 years
 - Leather – up to 50 years
 - Tin cans – 50 years
 - Aluminium cans – 80 to 100 years
 - Glass bottles – 1 million years
 - Plastic bottles – indefinitely

**In this document the term landfill refers to the method of solid waste disposal in which waste is buried in the ground.*

The Issues

The mismanagement of natural resources, excessive waste and the resulting environmental conditions pose a challenge to sustainable development.

It is important to consider the effects that human actions have on the environment, health and the economy.

Environment

Irresponsible waste disposal results in air, water and soil contamination.

Other types of waste can take many years to decompose (see left) and add to the accumulation of unnatural materials and chemicals in the environment.

Organic and animal waste that is not disposed of wisely can pollute waterways resulting in contaminated drinking water, algal blooms and damage to plant and animal life.

Waste management strategies, including incineration and landfill*, can release greenhouse gases and toxic chemicals into the air, soil and waterways.

Health

Deteriorating environment conditions are a major factor in poor human health and quality of life.

Organic waste left to rot on the streets poses a serious health risk as it attracts rats and other disease carriers.

Polluted waterways make communities more vulnerable to water-borne diseases.

Soil contamination can result in reduced viability for food supply purposes.

Toxins released into the air contribute to air pollution and contribute to increased incidence of human respiratory diseases, especially in urban areas.

In addition, items such as glass can be hazardous to the safety of humans and animals alike.

Economy

Poor environmental conditions can affect the economy in many ways, including decreased food production, poor human and animal health, and reduced tourism opportunities.

Inefficient resource use affects economic efficiency and the ability to produce enough food and materials for growing populations.

Taking Action

Every person contributes to the total impact that humans have on the planet. Therefore, we can all be a part of the environmental solution through our daily activities and choices.

See below for examples of initiatives that can be used in the community to help improve the environment.

Community Education

Education programs raise awareness about the impact of waste.

Examples of activities that can be used to highlight the issues include; public meetings, festivals, parades, exhibitions, school teaching programs and drama performances.

Research

Environmental research helps to assess problems in the local environment and determine both the cause and possible solutions.

Results can be presented to students, community members and government to increase knowledge about the issues and encourage action.

Government Lobbying

Governments often allocate funds and resources for the repair and protection of the environment.

By lobbying government about environmental issues, communities show that the issues are important to them.

Environmental projects may be funded with government grants allocated specifically for the environment.

Waste Management

The management of waste should be a concern to all citizens.

To prevent toxic materials

contaminating the environment, care should be taken to dispose of waste with as little impact as possible.

Four Steps to Waste Reduction

Consumers can play an important part in resolving the problem of the growing amount of waste by avoiding, reducing, reusing and recycling.

Recycling can play an important part in reducing the amount of waste sent for disposal it should be seen as the last step in any waste reduction program. Not all types of waste are recyclable and the necessary infrastructure is not always easily accessible.

Clean Up Events & Projects

Clean up events help to remove waste from the environment and bring attention to issues such as littering and a lack of waste management facilities. Ongoing projects involving the community help to address these issues and bring about positive change.

Examples of projects include:

- Composting organic waste to produce fertiliser
- Education programs in schools and the wider community
- Waste audit and reduction campaigns
- Recycling initiatives to divert resources from the waste stream



Questions to Help Initiate Change ...

- What happens to the waste produced in your community?
- Are the current methods of waste disposal sustainable?
- How do current waste disposal methods impact on the environment and on community health?
- How can the waste be avoided, reduced, re-used or recycled?
- What can everyone do to contribute to positive action?
- How can you achieve better practices in your community?

Further Information

Clean Up the World

www.cleanuptheworld.org

Clean Up Australia

www.cleanup.com.au

International Solid Waste Association

www.iswa.org/

UNEP Chemicals

www.chem.unep.ch

UNEP Production and Consumption Branch

<http://www.unep.fr/en/branches/pc.htm>

World Health Organisation

www.who.int

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