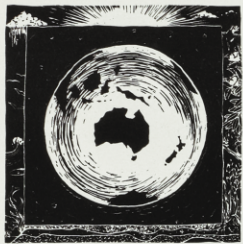


GARBAGE



Living in a throwaway world

By Andrea Lomdahl



One of the real limits to growth in the future will not be lack of resources, but the capacity of the environment to deal with waste in all its forms. New Zealand is now learning from the festering rubbish mountains of Europe and North America, but short term thinking still dominates our attitude to waste.

RECENTLY I MADE ONE of my regular pilgrimages to the local landfill to dispose of the household waste products which I had not been able to recycle or fit into the plastic rubbish bags the local council provides. Recycling facilities at the landfill are rather limited, consisting simply of three bins in which to put green, brown and clear glass containers. One would think that people would find this system fairly simple to follow, but I discovered when I went to recycle my bottles that the different colours of glass had been well mixed up in the bins, and all sorts

of other unsavoury rotting rubbish had been thrown in as well.

I have observed on many other occasions that the valiant recycling efforts that manage to get off the ground in our society are often thwarted by ignorant behaviour of this sort. This set me thinking about the problems of dealing with the huge amounts of the waste we generate, and how one might encourage some sensible reduction in this waste quantity. It is clear firstly that we should all take a hard look at ourselves and our own wasteful habits.

Golden Rules

The four principles of dealing with rubbish should be: use less, re-use, recycle and dispose of safely – in that order.

We are all part of a disturbingly wasteful consumer society that seems determined to use the Earth's resources as fast as possible. We readily bow down to the demands of fashion, changing our clothes, car, household fittings and anything else we think might not measure up to the standards set by our neighbours. That is of course if we have the money to do so. Otherwise we simply wish we had the money to be wasteful like everyone else.

I attended the inaugural conference of the Institute of Waste Management recently, and one of the speakers, Alastair Gunn of Waikato University, said in response to a question, that in his view the meaning of life to most children was "shopping". No doubt the remark was somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but there is also a considerable amount of truth in it. On the one hand we berate the Government and local authorities for not doing enough about "The Waste Problem", and on the other hand we bring up our children in the same image of ourselves, that is as materialistic consumers.

We all think environmental problems should be solved, but preferably by others, and that gets me back to recycling. It takes a little bit of effort to separate out the brown, green and clear bottles, and obviously some people are not able to make this effort. There are also those who would deliberately thwart such initiatives by throwing in any old rubbish, and very little can be done about these people.

Everyone's Responsibility

It takes an effort to make recycling successful, and this effort must in part at least be at an individual level. Each one of us must take responsibility in some small way for the global environmental crisis, for it is simply the outcome of the collective selfishness and greed of many millions of people.

This is not to say, however, that all levels of government should not be making much more effort to promote waste reduction and reuse and ensure wastes are managed properly. Politicians are certainly raising environmental issues regularly at present as these issues are popular ones. It is to be hoped that very soon the actions on resource conservation start following the words.

One example is the report on "Packaging and the New Zealand Environment" produced recently by the Ministry for the Environment. It was generally a well-written report which outlined some useful initiatives, but it backs away from the real interventions needed to have a strong impact on the way we manage waste. It sets a target for a 20 percent reduction in solid waste volumes by