***Excerpt from***

**Recycling Is Garbage**

**Rinsing out tuna cans and tying up newspapers may make you feel virtuous, but recycling could be America's most wasteful activity--by John Tierney**

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In 1987 a barge named the Mobro 4000 wandered thousands of miles trying to unload its cargo of Long Islanders' trash. Its journey had a strange effect on America. Believing that there was no more room in landfills, Americans decided that recycling was their only option.

Their intentions were good. Recycling does sometimes makes sense. But the simplest and cheapest option is usually to bury garbage in an environmentally safe landfill.

The landfill crisis of 1987 was a false alarm. There's no shortage of landfill space. There's no reason to force people to recycle. Recycling may be the most wasteful activity in modern America. It is a waste of time and money, a waste of human and natural resources.

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Some say *we're squandering irreplaceable natural resources*. Yes, a lot of trees have been cut down to make today's newspaper. But even more trees will probably be planted in their place. America's supply of timber has been increasing for decades. The nation's forests have three times more wood today than in 1920. "We're not running out of wood, so why do we worry so much about recycling paper?" asks Jerry Taylor. He is the director of natural resource studies at the Cato Institute. "Paper is an agricultural product, made from trees grown specifically for paper production. Acting to conserve trees by recycling paper is like acting to conserve cornstalks by cutting back on corn consumption."

Some resources, of course, don't grow back. Some people worry about running out of metals and fossil fuels. Especially during the oil shortages of the l970s—that’s when modern recycling philosophy developed. But the oil scare was temporary. The costs of natural resources have been declining for thousands of years. They've become less scarce because we find new supplies or devise new technologies.

Fifty years ago, for instance, tin and copper were said to be in danger of depletion. Conservationists urged mandatory recycling and rationing so future generations wouldn't be deprived of food containers and telephone wires. But today tin and copper are cheaper than ever. Most food containers don't use any tin. Phone calls travel through fiber-optic cables of glass, which is made from sand. Should the world ever run out of sand, we could dispense with wires by using cell phones.

The only resource that continues to get more expensive is human time. The cost of labor has been rising for centuries. An hour of labor today buys more energy or raw materials than ever before. It's wasteful to spend human labor to save raw materials that are cheap today and will probably be cheaper tomorrow.

Even the Worldwatch Institute, an environmental group that strongly favors recycling, agrees there are no foreseeable shortages of most minerals. "In retrospect," a Worldwatch report notes, "the question of scarcity may never have been the most important [reason to recycle]."

*It is better to recycle than to throw away*. This is the most enduring myth. By now, many experts and public officials acknowledge that America could simply bury its garbage. But they object to this option because it diverts trash from recycling programs. Recycling has become a goal in itself. Why is it better to recycle? The usual claims are that it saves money and protects the environment. These sound reasonable until you actually start handling garbage.

EVERY TIME A SANlTATlON DEPARTMENT CREW PICKS UP a load of bottles and cans from the curb, New York City loses money. The recycling program consumes resources. It requires extra administrators and a continual public relations campaign explaining the rules. For every ton of glass, plastic and metal that the truck delivers to a private recycler, the city currently spends $200 more than it would spend to bury the material in a landfill. City officials hoped to recover this extra cost by selling the material. This didn’t work. The market price of a ton has never been anywhere near $200. In fact, it has rarely risen as high as zero. Private recyclers usually demand a fee. So the city, having already lost $200 collecting the ton of material typically has to pay another $40 to get rid of it.

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Once people switch to a pay-as-you-throw system, they throw away less-typically at least 10 to 15 percent less. Some shop differently, some take their names off junk-mail lists; some recycle.

Those who want to recycle can do so. Others can recycle whatever makes economic sense to them. "In a purely market-driven situation, people would still recycle according to what makes sense in their area," says Lynn Scarlett. She is the vice president of research at the Reason Foundation, which has studied pay-as-you-throw systems. "In most places it would pay to recycle aluminum cans, corrugated cardboard and office paper. A lot of newspapers and some clear glass would be recycled. … They wouldn't bother with some of the things being mandated today, like mixed paper and certain plastics."

This is the real Tragedy of the Dump: the waste of public funds on recycling programs, the needless public alarm about landfills.