

## Waste footprint

*"A child born in a wealthy country is likely to consume, waste, and pollute more in his lifetime than 50 children born in developing nations. Our energy-burning lifestyles are pushing our planet to the point of no return."* **George Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury**

### Waste: a mountain to climb

In the UK we are creating, quite literally, a mountain of waste every year - over 400 million tonnes of it to be precise. Our ever higher levels of waste mean we are using natural resources at a faster and faster rate, putting an increasing strain on the planet's ability to deal with our waste.

Virtually everything we use creates waste throughout its lifecycle. There is waste associated with the extraction, harvesting, manufacture or transport of materials and products; waste connected with using a product, e.g. a car using petrol or a toy using batteries; and then the harmful effects of waste disposal.

Reducing this vast sum of waste is an uphill task but it is a challenge that must be faced if we are to reduce our footprint on the planet.

#### So what is a waste footprint?

Put simply, this is the environmental, economic and social impacts that results from the waste we create. Our waste footprint can be very visible: scarred landscapes from quarrying for aluminum to make cans or cutting down trees to provide paper. Landfill sites or incinerator plants where most of our waste ends up are also very visual waste footprints. But there are also invisible impacts such as methane, a **greenhouse gas**, released from landfill sites or toxins leaking out from waste sites into the land or water supplies. So using fewer natural resources and reducing waste is a powerful way of shrinking our footprint.

creating even more pollution.

As spaces for landfill sites run out, an increasing amount of our waste is incinerated (burned). Burning waste can release pollutants into the atmosphere as well as carbon dioxide, the main **greenhouse gas**. Burning waste actually only reduces its weight by two thirds; the third that is left is ash which then has to be disposed of...in a landfill site.

So, while there is no easy way to flatten our waste mountain, creating less waste in the first place and recycling far more would definitely help.

#### Waste footprint: how it measures up

- Most of the world's waste is created by just 5% of the world's people.
- In less than two hours, the waste we produce in the UK would fill the Albert Hall in London.
- 900 million items of clothing are sent to landfill each year in the UK.
- There are 2,300 landfill sites in the UK. Existing landfills are predicted to be full up within the next 5 -10 years.
- On average, 16% of the money spent on products pays for the packaging, which usually then becomes waste.
- Globally, one million birds and 100,000 marine mammals and sea turtles die every year because they become tangled up in, or swallow plastics.
- It has been estimated that 80% of the contents of our bins could be recycled; in 2007 the UK recycled just 27% of its waste.
- One recycled tin can saves enough energy to power a television for 3 hours.
- 25 two litre drink bottles can be recycled into an adult-sized fleece jacket.

#### Flattening the mountain: managing our waste

Most waste in the UK ends up in large holes in the ground, known as landfill. As waste rots down in landfill sites it produces two dangerous substances: methane, a powerful **greenhouse gas** which contributes to climate change; and leachate, which can leak from landfill sites into water courses and so cause pollution. There is another problem – waste from cities is often transported many miles by large lorries burning lots of fuel and

**Did you know?****Most waste in the UK is created by industry and not households?**

You may be surprised to learn that a massive 93% of all waste comes from business and industry - places such as factories, shops and offices and industries like manufacturing, building and transport. So does this mean we should stop blaming ourselves and start pointing the finger at business and industry?

Well, no! Responsibility must be shared between industry and us, the 'consumers' (and indeed, legislators such as local authorities, the government and the European Parliament). It is us, after all, who make choices about what we buy: cans of drink, pre-cooked and packaged meals or take-aways, plastic toys, clothes, new mobile phones, washing machines, cars etc. It might be argued that business and industry is simply responding to 'consumer (our) demand'.

**But what can I do?**

By refusing to buy products that come with heaps of packaging; refusing products that cannot be recycled and by buying products that use recycled material, such as recycled paper, you can send a strong message to business and industry to clean up its act. We can also lobby our local, regional, national and European representatives to tighten up regulations so that industry and business create less waste.

**Moving the mountain elsewhere: how our wasteful lifestyles impact on the poor**

Our increased wealth and prosperity have come at a price. We have built mountains of waste in the North and left scarred environments and societies in the South. It is often communities in developing countries that are badly affected by mining or logging, for example, to supply the resources to make the goods that we eventually throw away. Yet the people of developing countries themselves are often the least wasteful.

**Did you know?****There is a growing problem of e-waste in African countries, a problem created by old computers from Europe being dumped in Africa?**

Every month a million second-hand computers are imported to Nigeria. Most of them are useless and soon find their way to waste sites. The European Union, where most of the old computers come from, have signed a special convention (the Basel Convention Ban Amendment) which is meant to outlaw the dumping of e-waste on the developing world, but this ban is being ignored resulting in millions of useless products flooding into Africa.

The mountains of e-waste piling up in some African countries are poisoning water supplies and damaging local people's health. Children as young as six search the dumps for metal scraps which are littered with the poisonous waste from thousands of broken computer monitor screens.

Campaign group Consumers International is now calling for stricter procedures to make sure that second-hand electronic goods are in good working order before being shipped to developing countries. The group says that electrical equipment that is no longer working or needed should be disposed of or recycled in the country that it originates from in an environmentally friendly way, not dumped on poorer countries that are unable to deal safely with it.

For more information and to view a video visit the [Consumer International](#) website.

**Do you know it is easy it is to recycle your IT and other electrical equipment safely and in ways that can benefit others?**

**Old computers:** [Click here](#) for a list of organisations that help disadvantaged people in the UK and in developing countries gain access to IT equipment. You can find organisations working in your area.

**Old mobile phones: Did you know just 3% of mobile phone owners recycle their old phones?** Yet there are loads of places to recycle unwanted, old or worn out old mobile phones. Many charities collect old phones and the money goes towards funding their work with poor communities in developing countries. For example [Oxfam](#) [WaterAid](#) [Christian Aid](#) There are many other charities that collect old mobile phones for recycling too!

### **Learning from the developing world**

Some of the lowest levels of waste and highest levels of recycling are achieved in some of the poor countries of the South. This is because thousands of poor people earn a living by collecting materials that are turning back into something useful.

Resources also tend to be reused and repaired to a much greater extent. In Malawi for example, like in many poor African countries, there is a return/refund/refill scheme on bottled drinks while Cuba is famous for keeping its ancient fleet of American cars running.

Most significantly Southern countries tend to produce much less waste in the first place and use considerably less energy. Mexico produces just half as much waste per person per year as the US. Bangladesh has the lowest consumption of energy per person per year in the world.

### **Waste and human rights**

Many rights may be denied to people due to our excessive waste, with the impact tending to be greatest among the world's poorest and most disadvantaged communities.

Some of the rights enshrined under the Convention on the Rights of the Child are threatened by waste. For example, Article 24 relates to the right to clean water, nutritious food and a clean environment. Toxins and poisons from waste dumps can enter the water supply and end up in the food chain threatening these rights. Article 32 calls for children to be protected from doing dangerous work. But it is often children in poorer countries that pick over waste dumps searching for scraps they can collect and sell, risking their health and safety in the process.

For further information on the Convention on the Rights of the Child [click here](#)

### **Millennium Development Goals**

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were agreed at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000 and nearly 190 countries have signed up to them. The goals are international targets for reducing global poverty. They aim to lift around 500 million people out of poverty by the year 2015. If this happens, fewer women will die in childbirth, fewer people will die from treatable diseases, many more boys and girls will go to school and the lives of millions of people will improve dramatically.

Goal seven is about making sure that there is environmental sustainability. There are four targets: reversing the loss of resources, reducing **biodiversity** loss, halving the number of people without access to safe drinking water and improving the lives of people who live in slums. Waste can affect all these targets. For example, waste results from high levels of consumption which in turn uses up valuable resources; cutting down forests and mining for oil leads to the destruction of animal and plant habitats; waste can affect water by poisoning the water supply and waste dumps are often close to slums and slum dwellers. So reducing waste and the way we deal with waste can have a real impact on helping to achieve the MDGs.

For more information on the Millennium Development Goals [click here](#)

### **Equal waste footprints: a way forward**

Our current lifestyles in the western world are unsustainable. We take resources from the earth and then discard them back again as waste when we have consumed them or finished with them. The levels of waste we create act as a kind of barometer to measure just how unsustainable our

lives have become. We need to learn to want less, use less, and be more generous – sharing the earth's resources with those who have so little.

### **Putting your foot down: the four 'R's': reduce, reuse, repair, recycle\***

The order of the '4 R's' is quite deliberate. Sometimes this is referred to as the 'waste hierarchy'.

To **reduce** the amount of waste created in the first place is probably the best way of reducing the waste footprint. Reducing waste saves energy, reduces the waste that ends up in landfill or incinerators and saves valuable resources and raw materials.

**Reusing** items rather than throwing them away and buying new keeps them out of the waste stream. Reusable bags for shopping, and buying clothes from charity shops are examples of reuse.

Our throw-away culture is one in which it is often cheaper to buy new items rather than have old ones repaired. But this is of course very wasteful. There are numerous items that can be **repaired** rather than thrown out: TVs, bicycles, shoes, clothes and furniture are just a few examples.

Finally, there are many resources that can be **recycled**. Materials like glass, metal, plastics and paper can all be processed into new materials or products. Recycling reduces pollution and saves energy while slowing down the rate at which **non-renewable resources** are depleted.

\* The '4R's' are often referred to as the '3R's' where repair is considered part of reuse

**There is a fifth R** that could also be used to shrink our waste footprint still further: **refuse**. This is a step beyond reduce. Rather than consuming less, this involves cutting it out all together! Examples might include refusing to take plastic bags offered in shops, refusing free newspapers and magazines, refusing to buy foods wrapped in masses of packaging and refusing to buy a new mobile phone when your current one is absolutely fine!

#### **Did you know?**

#### **Are you a precycler?!**

**Precycling** is reducing waste by trying to avoid creating it in the first place. So, if you are a precycler you think carefully about how to refuse and reduce (see above). Precyclers try to cut out as much packaging as possible; they think ahead and shop locally, buying things loose and bringing their own bags and containers. The benefits are many: saving money, creating less landfill, reducing **food miles** and conserving natural resources.

**How about designing a 'precycler badge'?** Think about what logo would be suitable and what simple message or slogan you could use.

For an article about precycling [click here](#)

#### **Learn more**

→ For more information about the waste footprint download our Global Footprints leaflet [click here](#) (link to pdf download)

→ Links:

[Global Action Plan](#) – runs an Action at School programme to help schools save resources and money.

[Recycle more](#) – facts, activities and games on waste and recycling for pupils and teachers

If you Google 'recycling in London' you will find information from many companies organizations providing recycling services, as well as details on what materials can be recycled in London and why it is important to recycle more.

[New Recycle zone](#) – a site for schools, children and teachers on the 3Rs - reduce, reuse, recycle.

[Waste Watch](#) – run a series of education programmes in schools across the country.

#### **Glossary**

**Biodiversity:** The number and range of species of animals and plants that live in a particular environment or the planet as a whole.

**Food miles:** the distance any particular food travels from where it is grown to where it is eaten.

**Greenhouse gases [also in glossary for energy]:** any gas that warms the Earth's atmosphere by reflecting heat given off from the Earth's surface. Examples of greenhouse gases are carbon dioxide, ozone and water vapor.