

## How We Became a Throw-away Society

- by [Elizabeth A. Zimmerman](#), Certified Environmental Professional

Also see Part II - [Waste Not, Want Not](#)

I once had a house guest from South America. During his visit, I happened to throw an old, broken blender in the trash. The next day it was sitting on my counter – in working order. In his world, people simply cannot afford to replace a malfunctioning item. They take the time and figure out how to fix it. In Cuba, they are still driving cars from the 1950's, mainly because they do not have a choice. New American cars have not been available since the Revolution and subsequent embargo.

In contrast, the U.S. is renowned as a "throw-away society." On average, each American generates 4.6 lbs. of garbage every day (source: U.S. EPA, 2006.) I believe a combination of factors has contributed to this phenomenon.

"Planned obsolescence" is not a myth. It is a manufacturing philosophy developed in the 1920's and 1930's, when mass production became popular. The goal is to make a product or part that will fail, or become less desirable over time or after a certain amount of use. This pressures the consumer to buy again.



Advertising trains consumers to want what is new and improved. It convinces them that the more they have, the happier they will be. Vance Packard, author of *The Waste Makers*, a book published in 1960, called this "the systematic attempt of business to make us wasteful, debt-ridden, permanently discontented individuals."

*Cubans put a lot of effort and ingenuity into maintaining old cars like this 1952 Ford Custom. With an average salary of \$19 a month, most Cubans could not afford a new car even if they were available. Photo by [Tina Gallagher](#).*

Planned obsolescence does keep costs down. Instead of making an expensive product that will last a long time, businesses produce more affordable, disposable items. In addition, technological advances are occurring at a breakneck pace. Some electronic items have become so inexpensive that it is cheaper to replace them than to repair them. Labor and parts are pricey. Few consumers would pay \$50 or more to repair a broken VCR, when they can purchase a brand new DVD player for the same amount.

Busy people often value their time and convenience more than money. It takes time, patience, and some skill to darn a sock. Complicated, computerized equipment may be difficult to repair. If a car starts to have mechanical problems, replacing it with a newer, more reliable model may be more appealing than tolerating it being in the shop for a week.

In a materialistic society, people may accumulate so many things that they may not value them. I will never forget watching an Ecuadorian boy absorbed in play. He had a truck made from a leftover margarine tub, pulled along his little dirt construction site on a string. I would not be surprised if it were the only toy he owned. In the U.S., most children receive so many gifts at Christmas that they do not have the time or attention span to open them all.

We also live in an era of fast food. In a sit down restaurant, food is served on real china and silverware that is then washed and re-used. "To go" food comes in cheap, disposable packaging. Pre-packaged frozen and canned food are increasingly popular, generating waste cardboard and tin. Milk used to come in glass bottles that were picked each up morning when fresh milk was delivered. Now, most beverages come in [plastic bottles](#), of which less than a third are recycled (source: EPA, 2003).

Unlike people in many developing countries, we live in a world of abundance. A 2004 study by Dr. Timothy Jones of the University of Arizona also found that in the U.S., 40-50 percent of all food ready for harvest is wasted. Jones estimated that an average family of four throws out \$590 worth of meat, fruit, vegetables and grain products each year.

Trash is fairly cheap to dispose of. Landfills and incinerators are out of sight and out of mind.

[Next week's article](#) addresses efforts to reduce, reuse and recycle waste.

## WASTE NOT, WANT NOT

- by E. A. Zimmerman

Also see Part I - [How We Became a Throw-away Society](#)

Some individuals and organizations are choosing not to be part of a "throwaway society." Instead of disposing of items like electronics and 1950's furniture, [Oak Ridge National Laboratory's property sales group](#) auctions them. While older computer equipment may become too dated for use in a high-tech research organization, it can still have value to small businesses or schools facing a budget crunch. The Laboratory was even able to sell a 4800 lb. slab of concrete to a local man who used it for a patio. Closer to home, [Orange Art](#), a wholesaler of art and stationary in Woodstock, re-uses Styrofoam peanuts and boxes when shipping their products.

Individuals who want to waste less also have many options. To start with, **avoid generating trash in the first place.** Bring your own bags when you go shopping. According to an Ikea spokesperson, the average person uses 1,500 plastic shopping bags a year. Buy in bulk when possible. Single-serving items require more packaging. If you go to an office party, bring your own washable plate, silverware and mug. Buy things that can be reused over and over, like rechargeable batteries. Clean counters with a cloth towel instead of disposable paper towels. Ask whether your delivery person will take back the plastic bags that newspapers come in.

**Fix it if you can.** Although he must endure a bit of taunting from neighbors for driving a "rust bucket," my husband takes a certain pride in keeping his old jalopies on the road.

**Sell it.** People collect all kinds of things, from milk bottles to spark plugs, Barbie dolls, hideous lamps, and barbed wire. Many go through eBay, which started up in 1995, and now has 276 million users around the world trading millions of items in 50,000 categories. The very first thing ever sold on eBay was a broken laser pointer for \$14.83 (to a broken laser pointer collector.) A private jet went for \$4,900,000. Anyone with a computer can easily sell unwanted CDs, DVDs, books and other items on Amazon.com. Both sites charge sellers a fee. Of course, there is always the good old-fashioned yard/tag/rummage sale. Divest yourself of clutter while making some spending cash. One person's trash truly may be another person's treasure.



Owners of a car like this don't lose sleep over scratches (or hoofprints.) Photo by Bet Zimmerman.

**Give it away.** Freecycle.org is an example of an InterNetwork created to divert waste from landfills. Their goal is to "help instill a sense of generosity of spirit while strengthening local community ties and promoting environmental sustainability and reuse." Freecycles' 1.6 million members offer, ask for and receive free items through online forums. The weekly ReminderNews has a "Good Neighbor" section where folks can request items they need, and respond to requests. The Town of Woodstock [transfer station](#) has a "take it or leave it" shed (which we fondly refer to as The Crap Shack), where transfer station permit holders can leave useful items for others, or take what they need.

**Recycle.** In order to keep up with increasing volumes of waste, Connecticut will need to almost double its recycling rate. Currently, 70% of our solid waste ends up being burned in trash-to-energy plants or buried. The law requires all residents to recycle glass, plastic, metal and paper, and other items. Recycling does not have to end there. Leftover lumber can become a birdhouse. Lisa Davidson of Woodstock freezes vegetable scraps like the ends of carrots in a plastic bag to make soup stock. Others compost food waste

(except for animal products like meat which can attract varmints), leaves and grass clippings. Coffee grounds will help make a garden grow.

**Buy products with recycled content.** This reduces waste while creating market demand for recycled feedstock. Every little bit helps. And don't forget to recycle this newspaper when you're done.

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