

SUSTAINABILITY NEWSLETTER

Is Recycling Sustainable?

Last month, Hawai'i County Transfer Stations stopped accepting plastic and paper for recycling. Our county joined hundreds nationwide that have discontinued recycling services following China's decision to stop importing and processing recyclables from around the world.

Modern recycling was introduced in the 1970's, and although our society and technology have advanced at unprecedented rates since then, the technology behind our waste management system has not kept up.

For decades, people have viewed recycling as the "better" alternative to throwing things away. Although recycling reduces the volume of waste sent to landfill, we cannot rely on recycling as a sustainable, long term solution, as the process is carbon intensive, and is becoming increasingly costly, inaccessible, and challenging.



In order for something to be recycled, first, it must be shipped thousands of miles to the nearest processing plant. Transporting waste is one of the most carbon intensive aspects of our waste management system, and our unique location makes this process especially difficult.

Once the waste arrives at the processing plant, how it is treated depends on what type of material it is. Generally, the recycling process involves sorting, washing, and breaking down the waste, typically either with heat, chemicals, or water, depending on the type of material.

This process is resource intensive, as it requires a massive amount of energy and water. Consider this- it takes more than three gallons of water to make one sheet of paper, but recycling one pound of paper only saves 3 1/2 gallons of water.

Is it sustainable to let thousands of pounds of waste pile up on our finite island home? Is it more sustainable to ship that waste thousands of miles for it to be processed? We could dive deep into the facts and figures that lie behind these questions, but the simple answer is that neither landfill or recycling are sustainable long term solutions, especially in Hawai'i.

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Because Hawai'i County discontinued recycling services, every piece of plastic we use on this island will stay here, aside from HI-5 bottles. Plastic takes up to 1,000 years to decompose, which means that every single piece of plastic you have ever thrown away here, is likely still sitting on this island. Consider the daunting amount of plastic you have thrown away throughout your lifetime: disposable utensils, cotton swabs, packaging, pens. Think about the household goods you replace every few years: spatulas, garbage cans, hair brushes. Take a moment to look around you... are you surrounded by plastic? Are you surrounded by things you will eventually throw away?

We cannot sit back and wait for legislation to wean us off plastics and diminish our waste. Rather, we must consider our choices as consumers, and begin shifting towards a lifestyle and purchasing habits that create less waste.

Going zero waste is not a glamorous or instant process. Zero waste means transitioning from plastic toothbrushes you have been using your entire life to bamboo ones, that initially feel a bit less comfortable in your hand. It means keeping that old toilet brush around that you are tempted to replace. Zero waste means going out of your way to use reusable containers for transporting food this holiday season, and skipping the confetti and balloons at the next party. It requires you to hold off on printing documents, and find new ways to use technology to accomplish your goal. Transitioning towards zero waste means investing in quality products that you can use for years to come, rather than replacing them.

For centuries, Hawaiians lived sustainably on these islands. In the worldview indigenous to Hawai'i, people and the environment are intertwined; when one suffers, the other does too. Now more than ever, it is vital that we make a conscious effort to shift towards a lifestyle that creates less waste, and recenter our consumption around the health of ourselves and our island home, rather than convenience. I am not asking every faculty and staff member to immediately adopt a perfectly zero waste lifestyle. Rather, think about your consumption, talk about waste with your family and friends, and remember the impact you have on this earth. We can all do zero waste imperfectly.

