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Eight Rivers Essay

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The Way to Waste Reduction through Minimalistic Mentalities and Recycling

On Earth, humans are the primary source of waste production. Whether we are aware or not waste is a large factor of our existence. In America, we, as a society, have become oblivious to the consequences of our cultural habits. With our easy accessibility to not only our basic necessities, but also our indulgent tendencies, we seek instant gratification and lose appreciation for what we already have. This mentality is a direct result of America's fundamental values. Each individual produces about 4.51 pounds per day, totaling to 267.8 million tons or more per year (United States Environmental Protection Agency). After setting your two or three bags by the road every Tuesday or making your weekly trip to the local collection facility, little thought is concerned with the impact you are leaving thrown on top of an accumulating pile of garbage. Over the past several years environmental conservation has become an increasingly popular idea in the United States. However, for many rural areas, recycling programs are not economically feasible or practical when it comes to disposing of our waste. For this reason, I believe if simple recycling practices could be implemented, and or better strategically applied by shifting our cultural mentality and establishing effective disposal methods, recycling could become practical for rural areas throughout the United States.

Once each garbage bag leaves its source, it can be distributed to a variety of processing facilities. Each having a different destination dependent upon its contents. In the United States,

our garbage is either recycled, composted, combusted for energy recovery, or put into a landfill. Out of the rapidly increasing total of 267.8 million tons of disposable waste, 67 million tons were recycled, and 139 million tons were disposed of in landfills, in 2017 alone (United States Environmental Protection Agency). In 2019, the total of recycled material grew to 138 million metric tons, or 152 million tons, more than doubling the recycling rate within the United States. Of the 152 million tons we are recycling each year, 30% of it is being shipped overseas, to countries such as China, Malaysia, or Vietnam, for low paid workers (Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, Inc.)^(OBJ). Although, recycling rates in the United States seem to be growing, in the past several months they have decreased because of bans China has placed on our mixed recyclable imports, as an effort to reduce their foreign garbage intake. The gap in recyclable processing has caused parts of the United States to reduce or completely eliminate their recycling programs, send (Chaudhuri)^(OBJ). Others, however, have chosen to fundamentally change how people recycle, requiring recyclables to be meticulously separated by the consumer before collection. In many large cities coping with these new restrictions, though not easy, are possible because of greater income brackets. Whereas for many small towns, who did not have recycling programs to begin with, now see even less of a need because of the current struggle.

Coming from a small town myself, as well as growing up in the solid and liquid waste industry, the problems that we face in West Virginia have not been hidden from view. West Virginia has in total, 17 landfills, 17 transfer stations, 3 tire monofills, and 4 commercial composting facilities (West Virginia Waste Management Board). More specifically in Pocahontas County, we have one landfill, which includes a recycling center, accepting plastic, cardboard, glass, and paper products, as well as electronic, tire and metal recyclables. Also, there is only one “metal only” facility within the county, which processes the metal recyclables collected at our

county landfill. The landfill itself has been in operation for 35 years and spans an area of 43.23 acres. On average our landfill accepts about 578 tons per month, for a total of 6,930 tons per year, rather inconsequential to the (West Virginia Waste Management Board)⁽²⁰¹¹⁾. Though recycling is offered within the county, it is not widely advertised or promoted, influencing many to continue to combine it all into a single garbage bag, which ends up in our landfill.

Though, recycling is not a widely accepted concept in many rural West Virginia communities, there is one factor each still has in common, which is a conservative mindset. For generations, American families have survived by their own physical power, by growing gardens, canning what they produce, having their own livestock, and in later years using refillable Coke Cola and milk bottles. As our civilization began to make advances, as it continues too today, our focus on industry and on making things more convenient, it has caused us to lose our former more conservative mindset. Today, we resort to buying individually wrapped food products and drink out of plastic bottles and metal cans. This is true for both rural and urban areas, though with the limited access to a larger variety of resources, rural areas tend to hold a little tighter to our previous cultural habits. This being said, what if rural areas followed the recycling habits of urban areas and urban areas began adapting to the conservative mindset of many rural communities.

To solve the waste issues rural areas face, I believe we should implement and advertise recycling programs within our county and individual communities. Within our school we should be encouraged to recycle. Containers specifically designated for plastic food wrappers, water bottles, scrap paper, as well as for food leftovers, should be provided in an effort to reduce the amount of waste we are producing in our daily activities. Disposing of our food waste has a rather simple solution given that most American high schools have agriculture programs. Our food waste could be used by the agriculture programs, to fertilize produce we grow in our greenhouse, by

composting waste produced by the meals we consume at school each day. The same principles could be implemented in local businesses, stores, and even within our own homes. Though processes like commercial composting and incineration are not financially possible or reasonable for areas, such as ours, that produce so little, more transfer station facilities could allow rural communities to connect with a larger geographical area that could accommodate such needs.

On the other hand, urban environments do not provide an ideal solution either. Though, they are more aware of their individual impact, their tendency and easy accessibility to products which produce more waste are more tempting, causing more waste to be generated. The solution urban environments provide through established recycling programs, though beneficial is not going to eliminate the problem. This is where if, conservative rural principles, were applied in urban environments, they could create the ultimate solution. For example, if urban areas bought groceries in bulk, instead of individual cans and packages, or started community gardens, it would reduce waste production in urban environments, similarly to how implementing recycling programs in rural areas would do likewise.

These types of group efforts could not only alter how we view our environmental impact, but also our cultural mentality and cause us to rethink our fundamentals. To truly “save the planet” from our own destructive instincts, we must not only recycle, but reevaluate if recycling is really the best solution or if also reducing how much trash we are individually producing would be a more effective method. Both urban and rural environments have their flaws, and are guilty of committing the same wrongs, however if the basic principles of both could be shared, our nation could shift how we save the planet from our own human existence.

Works Cited

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