

TAKING OUT THE TRASH: WHAT WE GET WRONG ABOUT RECYCLING

KITE & KEY
MEDIA

[SCRIPT]

America. It's one of the most beautiful countries on Earth. And, to their credit, Americans want to keep it that way.

Now, we haven't always been the best stewards of the land. But in the second half of the twentieth century, we started to get a lot better about protecting the environment and cleaning up our waste.

A great moment in American history.

Well ... kinda.

I mean, our heart was in the right place. But it turns out ... we got a lot of things wrong.



Iron Eyes Cody, the actor from the legendary "Crying Indian" ad, didn't just take on the persona for one role. In fact, he spent his entire career posing as a Native American. The truth only came out with a 1996 story in the New Orleans Times-Picayune in which Cody's half-sister revealed that he had been born [Antonio DeCorti](#), the son of Sicilian immigrants in Louisiana.

Like, a shocking amount of things wrong.

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[OPENING SEQUENCE]

Look, America, let's be honest with ourselves: For a lot of our history ... we were kind of gross.

Our cities were filthy.

We turned parts of the Midwest into a Dust Bowl.

We **set a river on fire** – multiple times. Seriously, do you know how hard that is to do?ⁱ



The tendency of Cleveland's Cuyahoga River to catch on fire (the result of an abundance of industrial waste in its waters) didn't spark national attention until a [1969 blaze](#) generated [widespread media coverage](#). Ironically, the '69 fire was one of the smaller conflagrations in the Cuyahoga's history; so small, in fact, that there are no known photographs of it. The iconic pictures of the disaster that garnered attention in publications like Time Magazine were actually from a fire nearly 20 years earlier.

Thankfully, America has gotten a lot more environmentally conscious over the years. And it's not just the work of activists and policymakers. Everyday citizens are doing their part too.

The place where you can see this most acutely is **recycling** ... which up until the middle of the 20th century was something that Americans basically didn't do.ⁱⁱ

Though anti-litter campaigns started in earnest in the 1950s, the movement didn't really take off until the 1980s.

So, what changed? A big part of the story was a trash barge out of New York called the *Mobro*. In 1987, the *Mobro* was attempting to ship trash from Long Island to a landfill in North Carolina ... until **unsubstantiated rumors that it was carrying hazardous medical waste** led the freaked-out officials in North Carolina to turn it away. Then it went to Louisiana. Where they did the same thing. And then Belize. And Mexico. And the Bahamas.

This wasn't even the most bizarre rumor about the *Mobro's* cargo. The captain of the barge [would later recall](#) allegations that the vessel was carrying everything from nuclear waste to the remains of Jimmy Hoffa, the labor union leader who disappeared under mysterious circumstances in 1975.



The *Mobro* ended up spending **six months** at sea trying to find a place that would take its trash. And, Americans became obsessed with coverage of this trash barge.

That's how bored this country was before the internet.

The *Mobro* had two big – and related – effects. First, the media reporting around it convinced Americans that we were running out of landfill space to dispose of our trash.ⁱⁱⁱ And second, it convinced them that the solution was recycling – not least because Greenpeace hung a banner to that effect on the *Mobro* when it eventually had to bring the trash back to New York.

Here's the thing, though: Neither of those claims were really true.

While small and unsanitary landfills **were** being shut down in the '80s, that didn't mean we were running out of space. They were just replaced by larger, safer, more efficient ones. **In fact, it's been estimated that if you took just the land in the country that's available for grazing – and then used just one-tenth of one percent of it – it could hold all the waste Americans will produce over the next 1,000 years.**^{iv}



This is a testimony not only to the relatively modest size of our waste but to the truly massive scope of the United States – as well as to how much of the country is rangeland. A [2012 analysis](#) from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service reported that of the country's 2.3 billion acres of land, 655 million (nearly 30%) was "grassland pasture and range."

As for recycling ... well, it's complicated. There are plenty of circumstances where recycling makes sense.

More than 90 percent of the greenhouse gas reductions from recycling come from paper, cardboard, and metals like aluminum.^v And they're also the materials that make the most economic sense to recycle.

[RECORD SCRATCH]

Yeah: **economic**. Recycling isn't cost-free. If the value of the material being recycled is less than the cost of recycling it, you've got a problem.

Take plastic, for instance.

There are so many different varieties of plastic that they're almost impossible to sort efficiently. Most of it degrades with each reuse. Making new plastic is actually cheaper than recycling old plastic. And the newest, high-tech methods of recycling it generate carbon emissions **55 times higher** than just putting it in a landfill.^{vi}

Much of the confusion around the recyclability of plastics seems to be intentional. Investigative reports have revealed that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, industry groups lobbied to have the recycling symbol placed on all varieties of consumer plastics - even if there was no viable way to recycle them.



So, with all those difficulties, how does the plastic you throw in the recycling bin get taken care of? Well, quite often the answer is ... it doesn't.

As the Sierra Club has reported, for decades about half of it was just shipped off to China, where much of it was never actually recycled.^{vii} That ground to a halt, however, when the Chinese government decided to stop taking foreign waste in 2017, as part of a program Beijing called Operation National Sword.

Seriously, that was the name. **So metal, these guys.**



China is not the only nation to get a little surly when it comes to issues of waste disposal. In 2019, the president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, raged against 2,400 tons of waste (misabeled as recyclable plastics) that had been shipped to his country from Canada. The Canadians were ultimately forced to take it back, but only after Duterte "threatened to declare war on Canada, dump the trash in front of its embassy in Manila, or personally sail with the waste and leave it in Canadian waters."

Now, in some respects, that was a good thing. Most of the plastic waste in the world's oceans, after all, comes from the developing countries we've shipped our "recycled" trash to.^{viii} On the other hand, however, losing that option also made recycling a lot more expensive.

Shipping the same waste to processing plants within the United States rather than overseas ... can be 10 times as costly.^{ix} And now many places that used to turn a profit on the materials they recycled ... are losing money. Prince George's County, Maryland made \$750,000 on its recyclables in 2017. A year later, they lost \$2.7 million.^x Recycling became so expensive that hundreds of local governments just ended their programs altogether.^{xi}



But here's the good news. There's at least one category where we could profitably be recycling more: electronic waste, the remains of discarded computers, cell phones, TVs and the like.

In recent years, only about 30 percent of e-waste has been recycled^{xii} — which doesn't make much sense. Not only is it potentially toxic to put in a landfill, but it's also packed with valuable metals and rare-earth elements of the kinds that we rely on for everything from consumer electronics to military technology.

It's highly valuable, we've already got it, and if we don't use it ... we'll only be more reliant on countries like China where many of those metals are mined.

Adding e-waste to the mix could save recycling as we know it. It could make the practice profitable again. It could be better for the environment. And it could even reduce tensions with foreign countries.

Which would be a good thing ...

... wouldn't want to have to set anyone's rivers on fire.

Seriously, don't test us. We'll do it.

[END SCRIPT]

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SOURCES:

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- ii [Facts and Figures on Materials, Wastes and Recycling](#) – U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- iii [“The Big Stories Then in the Clear Light of Now”](#) (Michael Winerip) – *New York Times*
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- vi [“Surge Into Plastic Recycling by Chemicals and Oil Groups Meets Pushback”](#) – *Financial Times*
- vii [“The U.S. Recycling System Is Garbage”](#) (Edward Humes) – *Sierra*, The Magazine of the Sierra Club
- viii [Where Does the Plastic in Our Oceans Come From?](#) – Our World In Data
- ix [“China’s Ban on Trash Imports Shifts Waste Crisis to Southeast Asia”](#) (Laura Parker) – National Geographic
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- xii [Municipal Recycling and Electronic Waste: An Environmental and Financial Opportunity](#) – American Enterprise Institute

IMAGE CREDITS: Inside Creative House, Bettmann, Rick Maiman, Daniel Allan, Ezra Acayan / Stringer (Getty) // Keep America Beautiful: The Crying Indian // Brandon Mowinkel, Morgane Perraud, Laila Skalsky, Cale Benefield (Unsplash)