

TODAY'S TRASH: TOMORROW'S TROUBLE

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[Assignment: Write an essay that uses logic to change the reader's mind or to strengthen an attitude that he or she already has. Choose a controversial subject, and support your viewpoint with evidence garnered from your research.]

(1) America has a definite problem on its hands. The general American public simply throws too much away. At nearly two hundred tons of household and commercial waste per year (industrial waste not accounted for), more than double that of West Germany or Japan, the United States is running out of places to put its garbage (Rice 98). Since 1/3 of the remaining landfills in the United States will be closed within the next five years, some actions must be taken immediately (National Geographic 411). While the growing waste problem will not be easy to resolve, the whole of the American public needs to make a collective effort to try to control this problem.

(2) Since it would be nearly impossible to convince the entire public to stop throwing away as much, environmentalists must decide on a means to dispose of all this waste. Today, there are basically two ways being employed to dispose of waste: dumping and incineration. Dumping is the oldest and most widely used form of waste disposal. Since the earliest times humans have simply dumped their waste somewhere so as to not bother or inconvenience themselves. Today, almost 90 percent of the disposal of waste is handled at landfills (Pollock-Shea 88). This form of disposal, however, cannot last much longer because the nation's landfills are rapidly reaching their capacity. Currently, the United States is home to nearly six thousand landfills, of which two thousand are expected to be closed by 1994 (National Geographic 411). Although this may not seem like an immediate threat, fewer new landfills are being built because of the strict regulations being put on their construction (Rice 98). If new steps aren't taken within the next few years to solve this dilemma, landfill dumping could become extinct sometime during the first half of the next century.

(3) Another method of waste disposal which has seen tremendous growth in the last decade is incineration. Incineration involves the burning of waste either selectively or as a mass of unsorted waste. Since selective incineration is costly because of the amount of work put into separating wastes, "mass burn" incinerators have become more economic. The "mass burn" method, which is popular in Europe, doesn't however work well in the United States because of the amounts of plastics and synthetics prevalent in American waste (98). Incineration, however, is still a sensible alternative since it reduces waste weight by 75 percent, and volume by 90 percent (98). While this method of disposal seems

to be a simple solution, many people do not realize that hundreds of thousands of tons of ash must still be disposed of.

(4) Most of what Americans throw away falls into four categories. The greatest percentage of our nation's waste is paper, contributing over 36 percent by weight (Budiansky 60). Glass and metal each contribute about 9 percent to our landfills, while plastic products make up about 8 percent. Although the amount of plastics may seem small when compared to the weight, plastics take up over 20 percent of the average landfill in volume (National Geographic 411).

(5) The American public, within the past five years, has just begun to notice the problems our nation is facing with waste disposal. As the public awareness grows, the number of interested environmental groups increases. Within the past three to four years a few curbside recycling collection programs and city collection sites have been established. These programs are headed in the right direction, but they are slow to start. Often inviting a legislative tangle, recycling collection programs fail to be fully effective because much of the public regards separating garbage as a hassle. However, many local as well as state governments are in the early stages of starting curbside collection programs for recycling, and some states are pushing for legislation to require certain materials to be separated and recycled. For example, the city of Seattle has started a reprocessing program that recycled 34 percent of the city's waste last year through voluntary separating and curbside pickup. Along with state and local authorities, industries of all kinds are becoming involved by offering to recycle their own product's packaging. Some companies are encouraging recycling by packaging with alternative materials such as glass and recycled paper. Although these programs are in the early stages, they are increasing public awareness which is exactly what is needed.

(6) Recycling is by far the easiest step to a better, cleaner environment. Most paper products can be recycled and used again. Glass can be washed and reused, or crushed and remade. Plastics can be melted and transformed into many different products including plastic signs, park benches, insulation for ski parkas, and even the "fuzz" on tennis balls. It's a shocking fact that of all the plastic used in packaging in the U.S. today, only 1 percent is recycled (The Futurist 60). Aluminum, the easiest to recycle, can be melted and reprocessed into new aluminum cans. Studies have shown that by recycling aluminum only 5 percent of the original energy required to make the can is used, and for each can recycled the energy equivalent of 1/2 can of gasoline is saved (Pollock-Shea 90).

(7) The United States, though making a respectable start, is far behind Japan and some European countries. The one major problem is the very amount of waste produced. Annually, the average American produces more than two times the amount of waste of a West German or Japanese citizen. Japan has for many years recycled a great deal of its waste, and at this point recycles over 50 percent of its waste (Rice 100). Also, several countries have nationwide programs to recycle glass, aluminum, and paper. At this point, we in the United States could use these countries as a model to guide our own efforts.

(8) Although there are no simple answers to our disposal problems, we can make steady progress by taking the problem head on. One of the main obstacles to overcome is the large section of the population which simply refuses to admit that there is a problem. These people seem to only care about their trash being taken away every Tuesday morning, and not about what happens to it once it is gone. They argue that waste companies are charging too much for curbside pickup, and that their tax dollars are being foolishly spent. What they do not realize is that there is little space left to put landfills. In order for these people to be convinced, they will have to see their neighbors making an effort to recycle and throw away less. This is the reason it must be a cooperative effort by all. Programs sponsored by local governments must continue to grow, and industries must continue to make a visible effort to protect our environment.

Works Cited

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