

History of Recycling



Recycling is considered to be a phenomenon of the last part of the 20th century. It is another example of modern science and mankind's ever increasing knowledge. This is an incorrect assumption. The Blue Box and other collection systems may be new but recovering valuable material from the waste stream has been in practice since humans first walked upon the Earth.

Ancient peoples recycled out of necessity. A cave man might catch an animal once a month. It may have taken several days to trap the beast. Food, clothing, tools, utensils and other items were all provided by the flesh, bones, and hide of the animal. Only the truly useless parts were discarded. In North America, the aboriginal people were still practising these same Earth friendly techniques when Europeans arrived in 1492. Agriculture and other innovations were present but native people continued to respect nature and make full use of the gifts the land, air and water provided. Some explorers from more "civilized" nations saw these people as savages but these "barbarians" were the truly advanced people.

The influence of Western European beliefs saw a change in attitudes. Nature was to serve man. Its resources were to be harvested. Great empires sought to expand their boundaries in search of riches. Newly discovered or conquered areas were stripped of their silver, gold, fish, timber, and other treasures all in the name of king, queen and country. Reduction or recycling was used simply to overcome short term problems or difficult times. Warfare is one such time where the unrestrained consumption of material is interrupted and available resources are better used.

The Second World War was the birth place of the waste problems that we are now trying to overcome. Raw materials and resources became scarce during the conflicts of the 1940's. Citizens were asked to help by donating their aluminium or similar material. The pots and pans were recycled to become aircraft, vehicles, ships, rifles, and munitions. War also has a tendency to accelerate the discovery of new technologies. While the public were gathering old resources, scientists were inventing ways to produce new ones. From a waste stand point, the biggest breakthrough of World War II was the advent of synthetics and plastics.

These two materials were used to make light-weight, convenient and disposable rations and other supplies for troops. After the war, the manufacturing of disposable items switched from "C rations" to *T.V. dinners*. The number of throw-away products and amount of convenience packaging kept escalating. At the same time, governments, especially in North America, urged people to buy products; it was good for the economy.