



Crooked Creek

Environmental Learning Center

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A SHORT HISTORY OF LANDFILLING

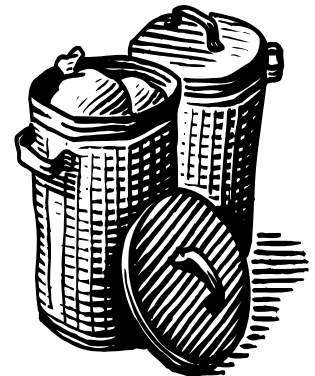
The practice of land filling garbage is as old as time and it has always been the preferred method of disposal. Recycling, like problems with waste and garbage have been consistent issues through our entire history.

Indigenous cultures of prehistoric North America filled acres upon acres with clams and oyster shells left over from feasts. At Altun Ha, a classic Mayan site in Belize dating back to 800 B.C., archeologists found that many of the objects tossed were still useable – suggesting that today’s “throw-away” tendencies also have strong precedents.

When people started living in fixed settlements they had to think seriously about their garbage and how to get rid of it. They often took the easiest route. In ancient Troy, the city literally rose above its own garbage. Much of the household garbage that was produced simply fell onto the dirt floor or streets. When the surface became overloaded with animal bones and other debris, it was simply covered over with a fresh layer of clay and soil. It has been calculated that the elevation of the city rose 4.7 feet per century due to its debris accumulation. Most of the bulkier garbage of ancient and medieval towns was thrown into the streets. Pigs and dogs gobbled up food scraps, and human scavengers sold anything valuable.

It’s interesting to note that one of the first municipal dumps in the western world was established as early as 400 B.C. on the outskirts of Athens. All citizens were required to bring their own trash a mile past the city’s walls. In contrast, it wasn’t until 1895 that New York City began the first comprehensive garbage management program in the United States.

Back in 1200 A.D., the Maya were doing something, which looked a lot like what we, today, would call source reduction. They were dealing with shortages of raw materials by stopping waste at its roots. Archaeologists have discovered that during this period, the Mayan practice of burying the dead with all their worldly possessions was discontinued. It is believed that this was in direct response to shortages of materials for making pottery and jewelry.



During the industrial revolution, urban populations swelled and rubbish in the streets piled up, creating highly unsanitary conditions. In 19th century Boston, scavengers picked through the Back Bay dumps and carried on a brisk trade in rags for paper making and clothing. Garbage scavenging is still practiced in many Third World countries, including Egypt, where 80 percent of scavenged garbage – including the filaments of light bulbs – is recycled.

You shouldn't be surprised to see waste reduction measures being instituted over 700 years ago. Over only about the last 150 years, our world has changed immensely and our current excitement about recycling is nothing new. Before 1850, most paper was made from recycled rags, not wood pulp. In 1908, the Model T was introduced. And in 1936, the first paper milk cartons appeared on grocery store shelves. About the same time, nylon and other plastic materials were being developed. All of these relatively recent developments have changed how we live and how we consume. Now, like for the Maya, some natural resources are in dwindling supplies. But with a growing world population and the development of industries and products, which pollute the environment, our concerns are even bigger.

Time, like civilizations come and go. As with those who came before us, we're at a time in our history when we need to think clearly how to deal with our waste issues. In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations. Seven generations is really not such a long time. We can estimate it to be about 140 years. How will the decisions we make today about recycling and waste management impact our descendants who live in the Salinas Valley, or in some other state or even country, in the year 2144? And incidentally, lest we think the year 2144 is too far distant in the future to worry about, let's realize that seven generations in the past brings us to the year 1864, just after the War Between the States.

So, as you can see, it's up to every single person to improve our environment for future generations. Let's all take an active roll and make it happen – RECYCLE!!!

Alan Styles
Acting Hazardous Materials/
Recycling Specialist



Do You Know These Environmentalists?

Name the environmentalist that wrote The Sand County Almanac.

Name the Pittsburgh zoologist whose landmark book is credited with having launched the global environmental movement.

Name the American author, naturalist, and philosopher (among other things) who is famous for Walden.

Name the explorer and conversationalist that founded the Sierra Club to preserve Yosemite's natural wonders.

Name the author and essayist born in Indiana, PA and raised in Home, PA, who was a famous advocate for environmental issues.

Name the politician from Wisconsin who played a large role in the founding of Earth Day.

If you need help finding the answers to these statements, come out to the ELC and see our Star Environmentalists Display





Looking Ahead

Celebrate Earth Day
Work Day at ELC
April 22, 2006

Open House
May 13, 2006

Fun, Food and Features of Armstrong County

For more information on either of these exciting
events call the ELC
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