

5 things that will blow your mind about the recycling industry

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November 9, 2013 | 8:25pm



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When you drop an empty can into the recycling bin, where does it go? To a \$500 billion global recycling industry that impacts the life of every American, and likely employs more people than any other industry on Earth except agriculture.

We're getting better every year at reducing the amount of waste we generate by repurposing it. And we're making a lot of money doing it. Take away the recycling industry, and the world isn't just a dirtier place — it's a much, much poorer one.

Here, then, are five things you need to know about recycling if you hope to understand how and why it's already transformed your world — whether or not you toss this newspaper into the correct bin.

1. Roughly 60% of the recyclable waste — newspapers to cars — generated in the US annually is recycled in the US. The rest is exported. By exporting, we save room in our own landfills and give countries such as China alternatives to cutting down forests and digging new mines. Also, in 2011, exported recyclable waste generated \$39.2 billion in sales for American firms.
2. China is both the world's top importer of recyclable waste — and its top recycler. Take, for example, copper. China is the world's leading producer of the metal by a wide margin. But what most people don't realize is that 34.1% of that copper — used in products from powerlines to iPhones — comes from recycled sources. So the next time you find yourself plugging a Chinese-made power cord into the wall, stop a moment and think: the copper running through it might have once lit up a strand of your Christmas tree lights the year before.
3. Before the USA exported its recyclable to the world, the world sent its recyclable to the United States. In the 19th century, when Americans were desperate for steel to build the nation's railways, steelmakers imported hundreds of thousands of tons of steel scrap from Europe — England in particular. It wasn't just steel, either, that made the US the world's top importer of Europe's unwanted wastes. During the 1850s, American papermakers imported millions of old rags from British recyclers and turned them

into newspapers, stationary, books and other new products.

4. For years, environmental groups and the media have depicted so-called e-waste (computers, smartphones, televisions and the like) as being dumped on the developing world by the US. But earlier this year, the US International Trade Commission released the most comprehensive study of the American e-waste industry ever conducted, in which it concluded that only .13% of the 4.4 million tons of e-waste generated by American in 2011 was exported for “final disposal.” An additional 3% also went abroad for mysterious and unsettling “unknown reasons.” Nonetheless, the combined 3.13% is a far cry from the long-standing myth that “most” American e-waste goes overseas. In fact, it stays home, where we’re coming up with new ways to repurpose and recycle the material.

5. The good old American automobile is still the world’s most recycled product, by weight. However, that wasn’t always the case. In 1969, New Yorkers abandoned approximately 70,000 old, unwanted, automobiles in the streets, alleys and waterways of the city. They weren’t alone in this large-scale littering: According to a General Motors engineer speaking at a 1970 automobile recycling conference, Americans abandoned between 9 million and 40 million automobiles across the United State between 1955 and 1970, creating one of the most serious sources of pollution in the mid-century United States. The solution to this crisis didn’t come from an environmental advocate or a university professor, but rather from Texas, where scrappy junkyard owners developed the automobile shredder in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Today, their invention recycles as many as 14 million American cars per year (and many more overseas) and supplies the American steel industry with roughly 15% of the steel-making raw material it requires, annually.

So the next time you send your recycling to the trash room, remember that you’re not only committing a good deed on behalf of the environment, you’re fueling a vast global trade that predates your grandparents. It may not be perfect, but it’s the best example we have for what a truly sustainable economy should look like.

Adam Minter is the author of “Junkyard Planet: Travels in the Billion-Dollar Trash Trade” (Bloomsbury Press), out this week.