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A Day for Zero Waste



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[Pollution](#), [recycling](#), [zero waste](#)



The can you set out by the curb every week may not seem so big. But when you multiply it by the number of people and businesses in the world, the amount of garbage humans produce is truly mindboggling. The harm caused by waste, both in terms of upstream resource extraction and downstream pollution, is so great that the United Nations declared March 30 the [International Day of Zero Waste](#) to draw attention to the problem.

The UN reports that globally, people produce between 2.1 and 2.3 billion tons of municipal solid waste every year. In your own community, that waste probably goes to a [sanitary landfill](#) or perhaps an [incinerator](#). But around the world, waste management facilities are sorely lacking.

For more than 20 years, the U.S. and other countries have discarded used and deadstock clothing at a [dump site in the Chilean](#) desert. Two years ago, the pile of tens of thousands of tons of clothing caught fire, filling the air with the toxic smoke from petroleum-based fabrics. At Deonar, India, one of the largest of 3,000 [waste mountains](#) in the country, more than 100,000 people – mostly women and children – live in poverty, picking through the waste each day without protective equipment to find recyclable materials to sell. It is estimated that [a million people](#) are killed every year as a result of mismanaged waste.

Not even the oceans are safe; five major [garbage gyres](#) have developed in the world's oceans. The largest, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, is [three times the size of France](#), but plastic waste has also been found in remote [marine preservation areas](#) and at the bottom of the [Mariana trench](#).

Wasted: 50 million tonnes of e-waste every year



Big Waste

Just because waste is less visible in the U.S. doesn't mean it's not a problem here. Landfills are the third-largest source of human-related methane emissions in the United States, because they generate [landfill gas](#), a powerful greenhouse gas comprising equal parts methane and carbon dioxide.

Although it is one of the most easily recyclable materials, [paper](#) still makes up the largest portion (close to 30%) of [municipal solid waste in America](#). It is followed by [construction and demolition waste](#) (20%), [food waste](#) at 14% and [textiles](#) at nearly 10%. Although small by volume, [e-waste](#) is rarely recycled in the U.S. or anywhere else and can have serious environmental consequences.

The Three R's

Recycling can significantly reduce waste. The [curbside recycling program](#) in Seattle, Washington enables residents to recycle 60% of their waste. Los Angeles and San Francisco do even better, recycling 75% and 80% of their residents' waste. Whether your city has a strong recycling program or not, Earth911 has got your back with its [recycling database](#) to help you locate facilities and programs that accept whatever waste you need to recycle. But a lot of [plastic](#) is not recyclable. And even when waste is recycled, energy and resources are used up to generate the material in the first place. [Consumer products](#) generate a quarter of the average American's carbon footprint. And as we learned when China [banned recyclables](#) imports, even successful recycling programs can stumble.

The best time to think about waste reduction is before you buy. It's always more environmentally friendly to reduce the waste you create than to recycle it. Whenever possible, [precycle](#) by not buying anything at all. Don't replace your [appliances](#) and [electronics](#) until you really need to and learn how to make the most of the [clothes](#) you have before you buy more. When you have to shop, choose second-hand, recycled, and recyclable products.

Your Zero Waste Day

On International Day of Zero Waste and every day, there are many ways that you can take action to reduce your own waste and the impact of waste in your community and around the world. If you're civic-minded, start to learn the [specialized language](#) of waste management so you can effectively participate in your city's or county's waste management planning process. At higher levels of government, encourage continued support and action on the global [plastics treaty](#). If you're more of a social person, use your voice on social media or write a [letter to the editor](#) of your favorite news source to raise awareness of the waste problem.

And no matter what other actions you take, look closely at your own habits to see how you can move closer to a [zero-waste](#) lifestyle. Don't let the size of the problem intimidate you. Choose one sustainable action that you can take today to cut down on your own [plastic](#), [food](#), or [e-waste](#).

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Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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