



Waste, Then and Now*

Activity E.f

GRADE LEVELS: 4-6

OBJECTIVE:

Students will:

- Identify reasons why the way of life of some americans contributes to our country's massive trash problem.
- Identify ways to revise their way of life so as to reduce the amount of waste they produce.

MATERIALS: none

RATIONALE:

Americans are often pictured as very wasteful in consumption of goods and materials. According to one article, "Americans are the most wasteful people on earth. Every day, 410,000 tons of banana peels, newspapers, automobile tires, and other items are discarded in the United States."1 the complexity of our way of life contributes greatly to the amount of trash we produce. If we compare our way of life to a simpler one, such as that of the early American Indian, we may be able to get some ideas on how to reduce both our consumption and our waste.

BACKGROUND:

In industrial countries, packaging contributes about 30 percent of the weight and 50 percent of the volume of household waste.²

Containers and packaging in the U.S. solid waste stream:

Steel	2.0%	3 million tons
Aluminum	0.7%	1 million tons
Glass	7.6%	10.7 million tons
Paper & Paperboard	14.5%	20.4 million tons
Plastics	4.0%	5.6 million tons
Wood	1.5%	2 million tons

1. Ken Sands, "Garbage: A Nationwide Problem" Spokesman Review, March 17, 1985.

2. Cynthia Pollack-Shea, "Realizing Recycling's Potential," State of the World 1987, New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 1987, p. 103.

PRE- AND POST-TEST QUESTIONS:

1. What is the relationship between a standard of living and the generation of solid waste?
What is planned obsolescence?

PROCEDURE:

1. Food packaging contributes greatly to America's trash problem.
 - List the trash produced through the consumption of foods (cans, boxes, plastic and glass bottles, plastic utensil, take-out boxes, paper products, plastic bags, and organic garbage).
 - Discuss: How did the Indians obtain food? (Hunting, gathering, fishing, farming, animal husbandry).
 - Discuss: Did the Indians have a disposal problem? What did they do about it?
 - Why were trash problems then different from those now?
 - Discuss: In what ways could we incorporate or modify Indian methods in order to produce smaller amounts of trash? (Grow our own food and animals, use biodegradable packaging, buy more unprocessed food.)
2. In our society, we use tools of all kinds from disposable razor blades to electric can openers. When these items are broken or worn, we often discard them as trash.
 - What tools or appliances have you used and thrown away in your household?
 - What is planned obsolescence?
 - What tools did the Indians use? (Bones, bows and arrows, spears, knives, scrapers, bone awls, or needles.)
 - what might we do the next time a tool or appliance is broken? (Try to repair it, compare cost of repair to replacement cost.)
3. When we outgrow clothing, it goes out of style, or it gets worn, we often throw it into the trash.
 - Why would Indians have been unlikely to throw away old clothing? (Hard to obtain, was re sewn into something else, didn't have excess clothing.)
 - What might you do to reduce clothing waste? (Give outgrown clothing away, don't buy too much, repair worn clothing, buy durable clothing that is less susceptible to changes in style.)
4. Can you think of items the Indians did not have which contribute to our trash problems? (Cars, tires, newspapers, paper of all kinds, and plastic.) Can you think of ways to reduce these kinds of trash?
5. Conclusion:
 - Why do we produce more trash than the Indians did? (Complexity of our culture - we don't make our own tools and clothing or directly obtain our own food: we use more manufactured and nonbiodegradable materials.)
 - what reasons can you think of for reducing waste? (Reduce disposal costs, conserve energy and resources, improve the health of the environment.)
 - List some things you will do to reduce waste in your home.

* Adapted from Cornell Waste Management Institute: Trash Goes to School