



Solid Waste: What's My Responsibility?*

Activity H.c

GRADE LEVELS: 7 - 8

OBJECTIVES:

Students will:

- Examine how their perception of a problem affects their response to that problem by using solid waste as an example.
- Examine the individual's and government's responsibility in solving social problems, and define ways they, acting as individuals or in a group, can take responsibility for solutions.

RATIONALE:

People often feel powerless to do anything about enormous economic, political, or social problems. Solid waste is an example of an issue where personal action toward a solution may seem insignificant. Even if individual action by itself cannot solve these large problems, it can be the basis for a positive, personally enriching way of living.

PRE- & POST-TEST QUESTIONS:

What are two things individuals can do to help solve problems of solid waste.

PROCEDURE:

Part I: Personal Responsibility And Solid Waste

1. Have students read the article, "My Twenty Foot Swath" (see following pages).
2. Ask students questions about the man in the article:
What worries this man?
What does he try to do about it?
Does he think his response is effective?
What response do you make when faced with a problem of this kind?
What is RAO? (Responsibility Assumption Overload) Have you ever felt RAO? In relation to what?
3. Use the problem of solid waste as an example of an area where RAO may have occurred for some people. Have students consider the following facts:
The world is now generating between 500 million and a billion tons of solid waste each year, and those figures could double every 15 years.
Americans dispose of nearly four times as much garbage as the Japanese, the world's second largest garbage producers.
A thousand tons of uncompacted waste would cover a half-acre of land three feet deep.
RAO is a likely response to a problem of this size.
4. Discuss the possible solutions to the problem of waste.
Who, ultimately, is responsible for solving our solid waste problems—county, state, or federal

government; those we elect; only those who generate the waste; you?

Should government strictly regulate disposal of all types of household waste? Should government force people to recycle?

Is it reasonable to expect that individual action has a chance of solving a problem of this size?

If not, what do you see happening? More and more land used for landfills? Massive contamination problems caused by these landfills? Increased ocean dumping? More resource recovery plants? Use of technology in a yet undiscovered way of handling waste?

Part II: Other Large Issues And Personal Responsibility

1. Ask students to identify other large economic/political/social issues they perceive they can do nothing about. Some examples might be:

Nuclear war

Hunger

Industrial pollution

Overpopulation

Unemployment

Inflation

2. Have students pick one of these topics or pick one you are currently studying, and list all possible solutions. Identify individual responses that can help solve this problem. Ask: How do individual solutions differ from large organized solutions (i.e., governmental or institutional efforts)?

How do the benefits differ? Is there any good to be realized from an individual action even when it won't be sufficient to solve the problem?

3. What is the law's role in determining individual response to the problems? Can you think of any laws that demand or encourage personal or corporate responsibility?

What legal problems might result from a law requiring people to aid accident or rape victims? (The "Good Samaritan" law in Washington State states that you cannot be held liable for civil damages for any action taken in good faith and not for compensation while trying to assist at the scene of an accident.)

The manufacturers of Agent Orange, the defoliant used in the Vietnam War, were sued to establish responsibility for the alleged subsequent health effects of dioxin on veterans. Should the manufacturers have been held liable? (According to law, the federal government cannot be held liable for injuries sustained in war.)

As a response to the enormous litter problem, would you expect the Washington State law requiring litter bags in every car and a \$50 minimum fine and/or litter pickup for persons convicted of littering to be effective?

What responsibility do companies manufacturing hazardous waste have for its disposal? Should the government regulate disposal? What are the company's responsibilities if the waste are discovered years later? Regulating businesses can be expensive. Who should pay for regulation—the government (which eventually means taxpayers), the consumers who use the products, the company itself? In terms of managing solid waste, should the state attempt to regulate behavior by laws such as the "Bottle Bill," which attempts to promote recycling by imposing a mandatory surcharge on all beverage containers?

Should counties and cities enact "flow control" laws that strictly regulate disposal of waste? (Flow control measures are enacted to ensure a steady stream of waste to burn in resource recovery plants.)

4. Ask students to think of a large local problem about which they feel—"I really should do something

- about this,” (e.g., your reaction to seeing hungry or homeless people in your city).
5. Did students do anything about the problem? Why? Or Why not? If not, what keeps people from being the solution? What keeps them from taking that final step of action?
 6. Are there any community problems you have helped resolve, even in the smallest way? If you have, what problems were solved? What benefits did you derive from participating in the solution (i.e., made friends, learned something, opened door for employment, gained satisfaction in doing some thing worthwhile, learned to approach problems in a positive, active way)? Compare your feeling of accomplishment to that of the man in “My Twenty Foot Swath.”

Part III: A Personal Responsibility Activity

Have the class identify a waste, litter, or recycling problem as the man in the article did, and determine what to do about it. The solutions may or may not be immediately obvious. Individual action you can take right now:

Start source separation and recycling at home.

Be a responsible buyer. Look for products packaged in reusable and recyclable containers.

Compost waste.

Speak up against litter.

*Source: Washington State Dept. of Ecology A-Way With Waste