



10 Minutes for the Planet

Recycling: a second life ©

by Sarah Heath

Hello! I'm Sarah Heath and you're listening to 10 Minutes for the Planet on EnglishWaves.

If the word 'recycling' is starting to feel slightly overused and daily news of how human beings are trashing the world has developed into slightly irritating white noise, a few facts should be considered: statistics to jolt people out of their inaction and lethargy and into decisive, positive change.

When figures are converted into an easily comprehensible image, the shocking scale of the problem might be better understood: every two hours, the human race discards enough rubbish to fill the world's largest container ship. That equates to 12 such container ships every day, which totals 4,380 of such ships every year.

A new study by the World Bank has calculated that without drastic and urgent change, global waste will increase by 70% by the year 2050. This increase will largely be created by urbanisation and a surge in the world population.

The Royal Statistical Society voted in their annual International Statistic of the Year. Last year, it was revealed that 90.5% of all plastic has never been recycled. Since mass production took off around 60 years ago, 6.3 billion metric tons of plastic has been made – with so little having been recycled, where has all that plastic gone?

Improvements are being made through government policy changes and greater awareness but the bottom line is that we are all in this together. Recycling isn't sexy and takes effort but if every household took responsibility for recycling – or upcycling – as many items of rubbish as possible, a very large dent would be put in trash which currently needs to be buried, burned or thrown into the sea.

Most people have heard of recycling bottles, cardboard and paper, and tins but less well known are batteries, reading glasses and inhalers. Wine bottles can apparently be turned into a whole array of 'new' things like lamps, vases and coat hooks. Creative types have turned grand pianos into bookshelves and garden fountains. One very determined ecologist transformed a 747 jet engine into a conference table!

However, there are smaller more manageable things which can be very easily achieved at home which, if everyone participated, could make a considerable difference. For example, recycling old crayons: a scheme in California called The Crayon Initiative accepts broken and old crayons to melt down and make new ones which they then send to children's hospitals.

A charitable organisation in Japan collects old dentures. They remove the metal, including gold and silver, from these artificial teeth which can then be sold on to be melted down. To date, the charity has raised over \$250,000 all of which has been donated to UNICEF.

The One World Running fitness awareness program collects old but still useable trainers and sends them to Africa and Nike's-Reuse-a-Shoe campaign recycles all old sports shoes and uses the materials to make sports surfaces such as running tracks and children's playgrounds.

Corks from bottles of wine are ideal for using in insulation, sports equipment and the organisation ReCork reworks the corks into soles for shoes.

Getting into the more bizarre end of the recycling spectrum is collecting hair – both human and animal. A charity called Matter of Trust accepts hair donations from hairdressers and pet grooming salons to make sausage-shaped “booms” which are used to soak up oil spills at sea. Hair soaks up oil so why not make use of the kilo of hair and fur each of America's 370,000 hairdressers and 200,000 pet grooming salons produce each day?

Slightly more morbidly, a rendering plant in Germany accepts the bodies of deceased pets and uses the residual animal fat to make glycerin for the cosmetics industry. And slightly more disgustingly albeit ingenious, Southampton Airport in the UK, has installed 25 chewing gum recycling bins. The chewing gum is reused in the production of tyres, toys and mobile phone covers.

And what about all those plastic bottles? Enterprising builders, largely in third-world countries, have started to build their homes with them! Roughly 14,000 bottles, all of the same size, are needed to construct a two-bedroom house. The bottles are filled with sand to make them more solid but they retain a flexibility which is ideal in earthquake-prone areas. These plastic-bottle houses are bullet-proof and weather-resistant. In Nigeria, the empty bottles are donated by hotels, restaurants as well as private individuals.

Far and away the most adorable way to recycle must be an initiative started by The New Arc Wildlife Sanctuary in Scotland who have asked women not to throw out their old mascara wands. These wands act as little brushes to be used to clean oil, mud, fly eggs and infections from baby birds and rabbits. It just goes to show that even the most unlikely items can be brought back to life in a different guise!

Tune in next week for more stories on the environment, here on English Waves.