



NATIONAL

WHERE DOES OUR PLASTIC GO?

— ASIAN LEADERS SAY CANADA NEEDS TO CLEAN UP ITS ACT



Return to sender! That was the clear message when 11 shipping containers full of Canadian plastic garbage left Malaysia in January. The unwelcome refuse was headed back to our shores. And Malaysia was **repatriating** a total of 150 containers of similar junk to 12 other countries, too.

“Malaysia is not the dumping site of the world,” the country’s environment minister, Yeo Bee Yin, said firmly.

Malaysia is just the latest place to reject Canadian trash. In 2019, the Philippines demanded that Canada take back more than 100 containers of waste we had deposited there. And Cambodia is threatening to return some 11 containers of our garbage. It’s all part of an Asia-wide effort to get nations to handle their own messes.

THE BASEL CONVENTION

The Basel Convention is a United Nations treaty that took effect in 1992. The 187 countries that belong to it, including Canada, agree not to export any waste that threatens human health or the environment.

Last May, over 180 countries voted to change the Basel Convention to include stricter controls over plastic waste. But Canada and a few other developed countries have not **ratified** the change. The federal government’s reason? “Environmentally sound” waste recycling programs create jobs and strengthen the economy in some less-developed nations.

Critics say that’s not the point. “People... are handling our waste and our recycling in hazardous conditions,” said professor Myra Hird.

NOT IN MY BACKYARD!

Countries, mostly in the **developed world**, have been off-loading mountains of junk to Asia and elsewhere. They’re sending soda bottles, single-use food containers, straws, plastic bags, shrink wrap packaging, and other plastic scrap. The reason? Just like Canada, they

can’t manage the castoff plastic they produce.

So a multibillion-dollar business has sprung up that finds places to sell global waste. In Canada, private firms take the material from recycling programs. They sort it, clean it, and compress it to prepare it for sale. These firms have been sending about

DEFINITIONS

DEVELOPED WORLD: countries with a mature economy and an advanced technological infrastructure

RATIFY: to make (a treaty, agreement, etc.) official by signing it or voting for it

REPATRIATE: to return someone or something to its original country



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12 percent of our plastic junk to other destinations annually. We exported more than 10,000 tonnes of plastic waste to Malaysia in 2018 alone.

THE CHINA FACTOR

China used to be the main destination for plastic garbage. It accepted up to two-thirds of the world supply to make and sell recycled goods. However, by 2018, it had had enough. It banned most plastic waste imports because too much of the junk couldn't be recycled.

Suddenly, all that garbage had nowhere to go – so unethical companies stepped in. For a fee, they said they could find new homes for it. They claimed it would be recycled. Instead, they sold it to firms that illegally dumped or burned most of it.

WORKERS IN DANGER

Much of the waste we send to other countries is **contaminated** anyway. That makes it useless. Low-paid local workers extract material that still has value. The rest piles up and badly fouls their environment.

It also endangers health. Journalists found waste at a Malaysian dump that was two storeys high and about two

CANADA'S BLUE BOX BLUES

Canadians generate 3.3 million tonnes of non-**biodegradable** plastic junk every year. About 2.8 million tonnes of this refuse ends up in Canadian landfills. Just nine percent of it is recycled. The rest is exported, incinerated, or tossed away. This waste threatens ecosystems, kills wildlife, and leaches toxic chemicals.

Experts say several factors contribute to this mess. For one thing, while municipalities usually run blue box programs, their responsibility ends after they collect the boxes. Then, private companies take over. These businesses want to make money. They try to sell recyclables to firms that turn plastic into pellets. These can then be transformed into other products. However, there aren't enough mills in North America to process plastic recyclables. So, recycling **brokers** sell whatever can't be processed in North America to companies overseas.

Another issue: since China no longer buys recyclables there is a **glut** on the market. That has slashed the value of our plastic items. As well, people and recycling plants often don't take the trouble to separate useable material from contaminated waste.

Bottom line: What can't be sold ends up dumped, buried, or burned. Recycling processes and techniques will improve. However, the only true solution, say environmentalists, is to make less of this garbage.

football fields wide. It oozed chemicals. And it just was one of many such sites.

"People [say they] can't even breathe if they [live] somewhere in the vicinity. The air is thick with toxic pollution," says Kathleen Ruff, a Canadian human rights worker.

WE NEED TO DO BETTER

So will Canada keep off-loading its plastic waste? Ottawa did impose new rules in 2016. Exporters must now get permits

to ship the stuff off shore – and none have been issued. Yet our garbage keeps showing up in Asia. We need to do better.

"If we keep our waste in Canada, we will quickly become far more aware of the enormous amount of waste that we're producing," said professor Myra Hird. "We [must] to take responsibility for it. One way is [by keeping] it in our own country and, ideally, in our own region." ★

DEFINITIONS

BIODEGRADABLE: capable of being slowly destroyed and broken down into very small parts by natural processes

BROKER: someone who arranges business deals for others

CONTAMINATED: something so dirty it is dangerous to use

GLUT: a supply of something that is much more than is needed or wanted



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ON THE LINES

Answer the following in complete sentences:

1. What are **non-biodegradable** plastics?

2. How much non-biodegradable plastic waste is generated in Canada every year?

3. How much of this waste ends up in landfills? How much is recycled?

4. How does this waste affect the environment?

5. Where do municipalities fit into the recycling program?

6. Where do private companies fit into the recycling program? Explain.

7. Where did much of this plastic waste end up before 2018?

8. What happened after this country banned most plastic waste imports in 2018?

9. What are some Asian countries doing with the waste they have received?



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BETWEEN THE LINES

An inference is a conclusion drawn from evidence. *A plausible inference is supported by evidence in the article and is consistent with known facts outside of the article.*

What inferences can you draw from the fact that Canadians generate 3.3 million tonnes of non-biodegradable plastic refuse every year?

JUST TALK ABOUT IT

1. As you see it, what is the importance of this story? Explain.
2. Why is plastic trash a problem? What solutions to this problem can you suggest? Explain.
3. *What if...* there were no plastic items? Explain.

ONLINE

Note: The links below are listed at www.lesplan.com/en/links for easy access.

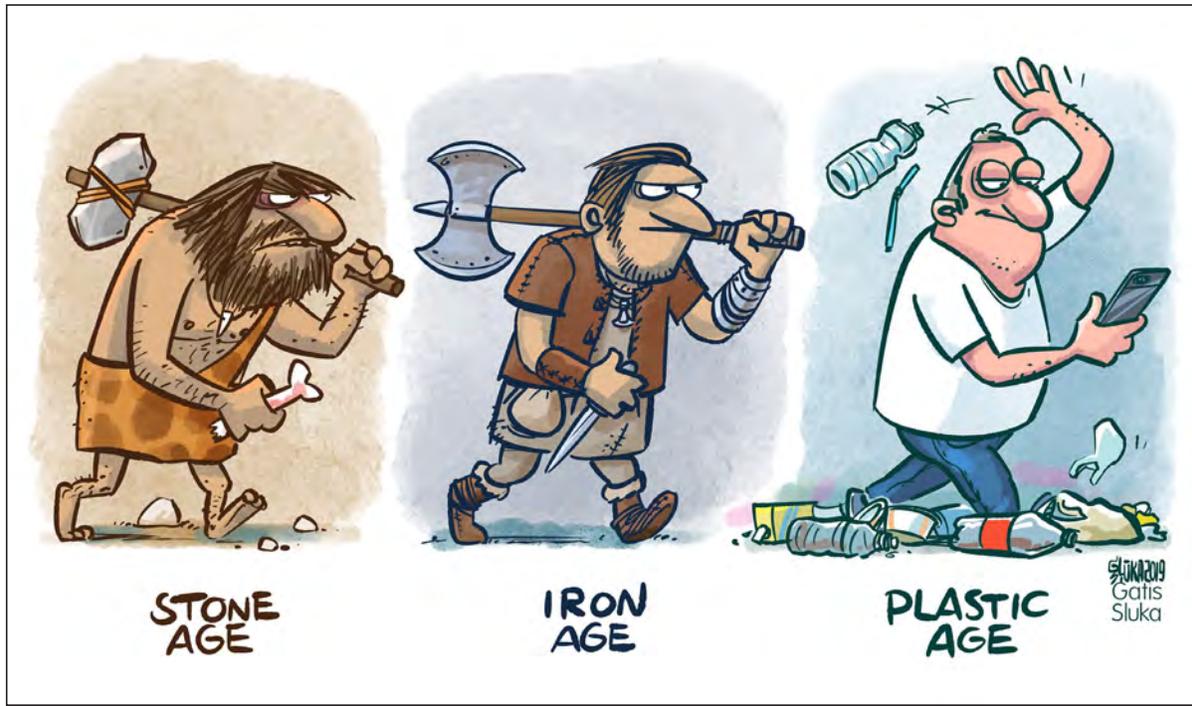
1. Read the Guardian’s article ‘Where Does Your Plastic Go?’ at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jun/17/recycled-plastic-america-global-crisis>
2. Visit the Canadian Plastics Industry Association website at <https://www.plastics.ca/PlasticTopics/RecyclingPlastics> to find out more about different kinds of plastics and the challenges of recycling this material.
3. Read ‘Is Canada’s recycling industry broken?’ at <https://globalnews.ca/news/5199883/canada-recycling-programs/>
4. Visit the North American Plastics Recycling Alliance website at <https://www.plasticsrecyclingalliance.org/> to find out more about continent-wide efforts to recycle plastic.
5. Watch ‘Tracking your plastic: Exposing recycling myths’ on CBC’s Marketplace at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8aVYb-a7Uw> [20:31]. ★



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YOUR TASK:

Examine the editorial cartoon, then answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper:

1. What do you already know about plastic products – what we use them for and what we do with them once we no longer need them?
2. Describe what you *see* and *read* in the cartoon.
4. As you see it, what might the cartoonist be saying about our use of plastic products? Explain.
5. For what reasons do you agree with the cartoonist's perspective? For what reasons do you disagree? ★



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Directions: Respond to the infographic below. What information conveyed in the infographic is new to you? What is interesting to you? What seems to be especially significant? Why? Overall, how does the information in this infographic enhance your understanding of the problems related to plastic waste and recycling? Explain.

