

Radio ESG on Waste Jan 06

Quality of life has continued to improve in the Western world, and the accompanying increase in our rates of resource consumption is also producing ever larger volumes of waste. Christmas is a particularly wasteful time of year, with hundreds of thousands of tonnes of rubbish being created over the festive period.

In addition to the usual bottles, cans, plastic packets and scraps of left over food, one billion greeting cards and 83 square kilometres of wrapping paper will have been thrown out this Christmas in the UK alone. Despite the fact that over half of this waste could be recycled, nearly 80% will have been disposed of in landfills. Moreover, as we continue to become a society of technophiles, the giving and receiving of electronic gadgets is also increasing waste production. Countless numbers of old games consoles and mobile phones will have been discarded and most of this obsolete technology ends up in landfill sites where toxic substances such as nickel, lead and cadmium can leak out and contaminate the soil and ground water.

This need not be the inevitable consequence of our consumer society. In Sweden for example, each individual goes through approximately 16kg of electrical goods throughout the year but over half of this is recycled. In Britain and equally here in Gibraltar, awareness about recycling is pitifully low. Gibraltar currently exports its waste to the landfill site in Los Barrios and although recycling facilities do exist, waste from Gibraltar does not get separated there. Disposing of waste by means of a new incineration plant, as currently planned, will result in the production of large amounts of air pollution and concentrated toxic ash which must then be disposed of safely. The process is both costly and environmentally unsound.

Recycling, on the other hand, offers numerous advantages. It reduces the volume of waste, cuts down the demand for raw materials, reduces energy consumption, air pollution and litter and is far more economical. Almost every piece of paper that comes into your home can be recycled into newspaper products. One tonne of paper from recycled pulp saves 17 trees, 2.5 cubic meters of landfill space, 27,000 litres of water, 4200 kWh (enough to heat a home for half a year) and 1480 litres of oil, as well as preventing 27kg of air pollutants. Glass bottles and jars are 100% recyclable and can be recycled indefinitely without losing their quality. Every tonne of recycled glass saves 1.2 tonnes of raw materials and the equivalent of 30 gallons of oil energy. Aluminium and steel cans can also be recycled indefinitely and in actual fact, it takes as much energy to make one new aluminium can from raw materials as it does to make twenty from recycled aluminium.

It is up to each one of us to make a conscious decision to be more responsible in how we manage our waste. Gibraltar needs to invest in the development and implementation of a sustainable waste management programme which must incorporate a strong recycling policy. In the meantime we can, and should, make use of the recycling facilities located just over the border in La Línea where bins for glass, paper and plastic recycling can all be found. This year, make a New Years' resolution worth keeping – resolve to recycle.

Environmental Safety Group