

Waste Hierarchy

In a world with diminishing resources and population growth, consumers who wish to behave sustainably have to be prepared to answer a fundamental question.

Our basic needs are clean air, pure water, unpolluted soil and diversity of species. But we all have certain wants.

However in order to sustain an environment that sustains us, are we prepared to CHANGE our wants so that we cause less environmental damage?

The future is what we choose. At present our consumer society is a "high quantity" society based on high levels of both consumption and waste. Are we prepared to change to a "steady state" society, a "high quality" society where we tailor our behaviour to the World's carrying capacity? It will not be possible to continue to behave as if there is no tomorrow and it is vital to ensure that all our material and human resources are used to their full potential.

In the waste hierarchy I believe we need to move from our present stage of "waste management", where valuable resources are called waste, garbage or rubbish. We must move towards the most sustainable options "waste avoidance" and "waste minimisation".

The first option reduce means to reduce both consumption and waste. A 1% reduction in consumption is thought to be equivalent to a 25% recycling rate.

Economists still seem to be calling for expanded growth at whatever cost. Is this sort of economic growth really rational, given that a growth rate of 2% per year means a doubling in less than 40 years?

The second best option is reuse. The word and action reuse has to become part of our daily lives. This should mean to reuse something again and again for its original purpose, until it no longer is able to function for that purpose. As a typical example today, a plastic lunch box washed and reused on a daily basis for several years - an ideal application for a marvellous material-plastic, that is light weight and long lasting.

In Pre-television/pre-consumer/pre-CON-venience days the reusable glass bottle was a typical ideal example. Can we today continue to be conned by the convenient overuse of one trip packaging?

The third best option is recycle. This should mean to recycle something for which there is a viable and genuine market and if it is easy to recycle.

If there is no viable and genuine market, we really have two options - use as little as possible of the material or article and dump what is used or far better, develop a market for a material that is easy to recycle. A typical example would be low grade paper and cardboard that could easily be converted into a very valuable product such as a "bio" or "enviro" pot for a plant. I will address this later in the submission. The Industry Commission Recycling In Australia Vol 1. Report No. 6 Feb 1991. Overview and findings page 4. states:-

"there is a danger that the recycling of some products will be pushed with the acquiescence of the principal firms to the point where there are considerable net costs to society. This appears to be the case with the recycling of PET bottles".

The present "waste management" and consumption trend appears to suggest - reduce waste but certainly don't cut consumption. Reuse something for some other purpose than its original purpose. Recycle as much as possible, whether there is a market or not.