

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING**Peter Schwartzman**

Landfills in the sky ... Oh My!

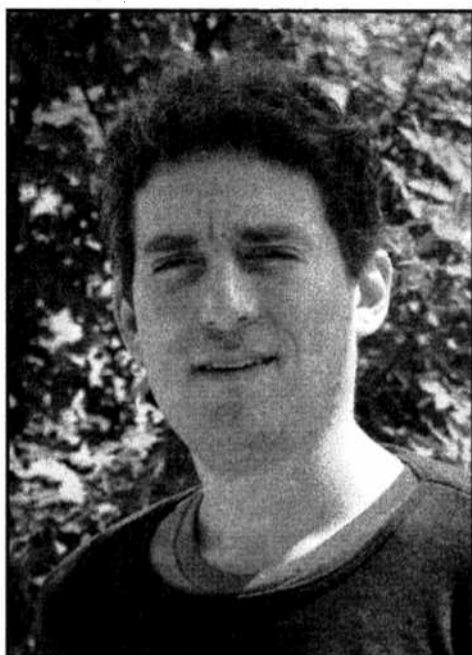
This week, while on a class field trip, I witnessed mountains on the far south side of Chicago. From Interstate 94 (Bishop Ford Freeway), an uninitiated visitor might wonder if these hills owe themselves to glacial movement and melting (as does Lake Michigan). In this case, however, they would be misdirecting their inquiry because these huge mounds resulted from decades of consumption and, its resulting byproduct, trash. One thing is unquestionably true about our society: we produce huge amounts of waste.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), we are each responsible for ~4.6 pounds of municipal waste each day (that's nearly 1,700 pounds per year). Does this seem like a lot? Well, it isn't even half of the story. If one includes all the waste that gets produced as a result of our lifestyles the number is much higher. You see, the municipal garbage figure presented here only accounts for that waste that is treated or brought to a landfill/incinerator. It doesn't account for all the waste that is released directly into our air, water, and soil by our cars/trucks and industry. And this often "left out" piece is huge. Consider that one year of driving an average car results in ~7,600 pounds of CO₂ pollution (not to mention other toxic compounds which are emitted when petroleum isn't burned in the presence of sufficient oxygen). This also doesn't count the billions of pounds emitted by fossil fuel driven electricity generators or the bulk of pesticides that get sprayed and miss their targets. Clearly, the "4.6 pounds per person" often mentioned is only the tip of the iceberg.

But, so what? Doesn't the modern way of living necessitate such huge masses of waste? Looking at other countries, many of whom have a well-being index as high or even higher than ours, suggests that we are wasteful well beyond what is necessary. For instance, the U.S. per capital municipal waste stream is ~60 percent higher than Italy's, 80 percent higher than Japan's, and 100 percent higher than Sweden's. Based on these numbers, it is pretty clear that we, in the U.S., could do a lot more to become more efficient and less wasteful. We knew this forty years ago when the first Earth Day was celebrated and we know this just as well now. Haven't we done so much over this period to conserve and recycle?

Everywhere you look companies are promoting some sustainable practice or meeting an energy conservation target. Even the big box stores are carrying products made of recycled materials, compact-fluorescent (or even LED) light-bulbs, and energy star appliances. With all this talk and visibility of environmentally-conscientious actions and products, are we really making progress? In terms of recycling municipal waste, things are improving. In 1990, only 16 percent of municipal solid waste was recycled. In 2008, this had more than doubled to 33 percent. Unfortunately, when it comes to the size of the municipal waste stream however, all we have been able to do in the last 20 years is flatten the curve. From 1990-2008, according to the EPA, per capita waste production rates remained the same at ~4.5 lbs; for comparison, in 1960 the number was 2.7 lbs.

How do we explain the fact that we have put so much effort into curtailing emissions and energy usage and it doesn't seem to be paying off? It isn't that we haven't made



progress but at the same time we are being more efficient, we are consuming more and more. Houses are bigger. Recently, we went through a gluttonous phase where BIG trucks and SUVs were the iconic vehicles—the poster child being the Hummer. We're also eating more (which is showing up in our waistlines). Our population has also grown—13 percent during the last decade of the 20th Century. It is no surprise that all this added consumption results in more waste. Thus, we can't just keep improving efficiencies and recycling more. We actually need to stop consuming so much. But how?

Opportunities to reduce are vast but we must challenge ourselves in significant ways. One of the reasons we overconsume is because we are saturated with commercials which feed us (~3,000 a day according to recent figures) the mistruth that our happiness is a function of our ability to consume products. It is no surprise that this message dominates our cultural space now because now almost everything is commodified, that is, made into a commodity for sale. We must demand that our public spaces, such as schools, parks, and bus terminals be devoid of any commercial advertisements. We must also examine our diets very closely. As documented by scholars such as Marion Nestle, the food industry is pushing extra quantities of cheap food on us (hence, why everything has corn syrup in it—the corn lobby demands and gets the lion's share of federal subsidies). We must decide to buy real food once again, from local/regional farmers as much as possible. In order to tackle our overconsumption, we have to begin to value things other than money, wealth, and stuff. We need to look deep in ourselves and redefine who we are in terms of important social measures of well-being, such as, strong family relationships, connected communities, and "brotherly" love. No doubt, all of this is going to take some work and collective action. However, what choice do we have? Will our mounds of trash be what future generations will remember us by? Is this the legacy that we want to leave? I hope not.