

Salvage to Sustainability: The Evolution of Recycling in America **By Jackson Enberg, Environmental Scientist / Reporting Specialist (Tulsa)**

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While the idea of repurposing an item for a different use has been a common practice for most of human history, you may be surprised to learn that the concept of recycling as we know it today is a relatively modern innovation. In the 19th century, recycling was generally referred to as “salvage” and was largely focused on war efforts or metal recycling as railroad and automobile industries began to grow. Scrap metal, glass, and rags were often salvaged out of necessity as the acquisition of limited raw material was expensive, particularly during wartimes when a country’s focus was on its military. Fast forward to the late 20th century when the growing concern for our impact on the environment led to the creation of Earth Day on April 22, 1970. Its founder, Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson said, “My primary objective in planning Earth Day was to show the political leadership of the Nation that there was broad and deep support for the environmental movement.” 20 million people participated in the efforts and demonstrations of the first Earth Day and after its huge success, Congress authorized the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in December 1970, just eight months later.

Since its popularization in 1970, recycling has evolved from a niche “salvaging of scraps” activity into a practice embraced by millions of Americans. According to the EPA, the recycling rate in the US has increased from less than 7% in 1960 to the current rate of 32% thanks to regulations from environmental agencies and the widespread initiative of local communities and businesses. These efforts throughout the US have contributed to this impressive growth, but there

remain many challenges the system still faces in its attempt to reach the National Recycling Goal of 50% by 2030. One such challenge is the ever-increasing amount of garbage and trash, known to the EPA as MSW (Municipal Solid Waste), that we create. In 2018, Americans generated just over 292 million tons of trash with about 94 million tons of this being recycled or composted. To reach the goal of 50% by 2030, the EPA and its agencies know that the best and most impactful place to start making a difference is in your own home.

So now that we understand the history of recycling and have an introduction to some of the challenges the system still faces, what can we do? The impact and importance of recycling cannot be understated, but making that concerted effort to separate your MSW, to get rid of single use plastic items, to provide yourself with a recycling option, will have positive and lasting effects for you and your communities. By embracing recycling practices, making conscious choices to reduce waste, and encouraging those around us to do the same, we can build on the progress we've made and foster a cleaner, more sustainable environment for future generations.

As Senator Gaylord Nelson said, “So long as the human species inhabits the Earth, proper management of its resources will be the most fundamental issue we face. Our very survival will depend upon whether or not we are able to preserve, protect and defend our environment. We are not free to decide about whether or not our environment "matters." It does matter, apart from any political exigencies. We disregard the needs of our ecosystem at our mortal peril.”

Nelson, G. (2016, September 16). Earth Day '70: What it meant. EPA. <https://www.epa.gov/archive/epa/aboutepa/earth-day-70-what-it-meant.html>

EPA (2023). *America Recycles Day*. <https://www.epa.gov/circulareconomy/america-recycles-day>

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