



THE CHALLENGES OF RECYCLING

LEARNING GOALS

- To think critically about where our recycling goes after we leave it for collection, and to consider the environmental and economic benefits and drawbacks of recycling.
- To understand the challenges of recycling in Hawaii and throughout the United States, and how those challenges are influenced by other countries.
- To practice drawing connections between local challenge global contexts.

ASSIGNMENT

Estimated Time: 22 min.

- Watch: "[Why your recyclables might have no place to go](#)" (8:05)
- Read: "['Horrible hybrids': the plastic products that give recyclers nightmares](#)" (~ 6 min.)
- Listen: "[Where in the World Do We Send Our Recycling?](#)" (7:33)
 - Scroll down to view the various charts

TERMINOLOGY

- **Contamination:** In recycling, refers to the inclusion of non-recyclable material in people's recyclables, largely as a result of single-stream recycling programs in the United States. China has recently created stricter laws on acceptable amounts of contamination in imported recyclables, making it more difficult for American recycling facilities to find locations to send their material.
- **Single stream recycling:** Refers to the process in which people put all of their recyclable materials, such as bottles, cans, and papers, into a single bin for collection. Single stream recycling puts the burden of sorting materials on recycling facilities and often results in contaminated material in U.S. recycling exports to China and other countries.
- **Presorted recyclables:** Refers to the process in which people sort their own materials in their homes prior to collection. The practice of presorted recyclables was common when recycling programs were first introduced in the 1990s, but was later replaced by single stream recycling in an attempt to encourage people to recycle more.
- **Hybrid packaging:** Refers to a mix of non-recyclable and recyclable materials in common consumer products, such as musical mylar balloons or cans with plastic wraps or vinyl stickers. People may mistakenly assume that their hybrid-material product is fully recyclable, making it difficult for recycling facilities to properly sort and dispose of the materials later on.
- **Single-use plastics:** Refers to plastic products created for consumers to use only once. Single-use plastics can take decades to decompose and their proliferation has been shown to accelerate climate change through greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Producer responsibility:** The belief that companies should take significant efforts to ensure that their products can be fully recycled.



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KAHOOT QUIZ

- Go to [Kahoot.it](https://kahoot.it) or use the Kahoot mobile app and enter the pin 06942755
- Or, use [this link](#)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why and how has China recently cut down on the amount of recycling imports they receive from the U.S. and other countries? Why is this problematic for countries who were previously reliant on China for taking their recyclables?
- How did China become a main consumer of US recyclables in the 1990s?
- What problems does America currently face in finding foreign recycling markets willing to take all of our recyclables? What are some solutions recycling companies have implemented to try and make their recyclables acceptable to the new Chinese standards?
- What has been the economic impact of the lack of foreign recycling facilities willing to take our recyclables? How might the increased costs of operating American recycling centers discourage Americans from recycling in the near future?
- What are some misconceptions behind the “solution” of recycling, and how have companies used recycling as an excuse to increase the production of plastics in recent years? Why are these misconceptions problematic for both the environment and the economy?
- What are some common examples of hybrid packaging consumer goods, and why is it problematic to try and recycle these goods?
- Why is it sometimes difficult for consumers to discern what is recyclable and what is not? How do companies and their advertising exacerbate this problem?
- What are some changes you can make in your everyday life to cut down on the amount of single-use plastics and hybrid packaging goods you consume?
- Why are most of Hawaii’s recyclables sent to California? Where might the recyclables go from there?
- Since China’s decrease in accepting recyclables from the U.S., what other countries has Hawaii relied upon to take our recycling? Why is it currently infeasible for Hawaii to process its recyclables within the state?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Why Doesn't Honolulu Recycle More?](#) (6:46)
A podcast by Honolulu Civil Beat on the economic, logistical, and governmental challenges of increasing recycling at a local level.
- [China's ban on trash imports shifts waste crisis to Southeast Asia](#)
An article by National Geographic on how China’s restrictions on recycling has negatively impacted other Southeast Asian countries, such as Malaysia, which are now becoming the main processing centers for other countries’ recyclables.



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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES (continued)

- [Oahu's Recycling Businesses in Crisis As Global Prices Drop](#)
An article by Hawaii Public Radio explaining the economic challenges of sustaining a recycling company in Hawaii and the impact of China's stricter recycling policies on local businesses.
- [Trashing The Islands](#)
A collection of articles by Hawaii Public Radio on issues related to recycling and waste reduction in Hawaii.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

Easier:

- Create a PSA on the challenges of properly sorting and recycling our hybrid packaging goods. Make sure to also include what we can do to make sure we are only putting recyclable material in our recycling bins. Share your work with your classmates.
- Recycling is often seen as the environmentally-friendly solution to the single-use plastics we use in our daily lives. Brainstorm and create activities explaining to a younger audience why this is not always the case, and share your work with a local elementary school or your younger siblings.

Medium:

- The Guardian article provides examples of hybrid packaging goods, as well as their environmentally-friendly alternatives. Do research on additional examples of hybrid-packaging goods and their alternatives, which people can readily find in markets or create themselves. Create posters or pamphlets based on your research, and share them with your family and school community.
- Consider how your school does a good job of promoting correct recycling practices, and in what ways your school could improve and cut down on its use of non-recyclable material. Create a list of feasible and well-researched suggestions, and share them with your school administration.
- The [Kokua Hawaii Foundation](#) is a non-profit organization educating schools and communities on the environment and sustainable practices. [Volunteer](#) with one of their programs, such as Plastic Free Hawaii, or attend one of their events to learn more about recycling programs in Hawaii.

Difficult:

- Organize a debate on whether it is more environmentally friendly for Oahu residents to recycle or throw items in the trash, after which they are burned for electricity in Oahu's H-Power facility.
- Policy advocacy: research bills in the city council or state legislature on measures to promote recycling and proper recycling practices in Hawaii. Write and submit testimony.

HAWAII CORE STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES (HCSSS) LINKS

- Content Standard [SS.WH.8.12.1](#), [SS.US.12.16.2](#), [SS.US.12.8.1](#), [SS.PID.4.16.3](#), [SS.MHH.4.9.1](#), [SS.PID.5.7.1](#)

Megan Tagami helped to develop this lesson.