

We must be responsible for our trash

by Karen Wood
Alaska Health Project

The papaya rinds, banana peels, milk containers and soggy tea leaves were losing their separate identities in the kitchen garbage bags. The shifting and bulging mass squatted in a corner, emitting smells of overripeness and buzzing with tiny fruit flies.

OPINION

The garbage threatened to dominate not only a growing portion of the floor, but also the entire downstairs airspace.

To five American students living in a middle-class suburb of Nairobi, finding a place to dispose of the garbage was no easy task. Though we had heard of a weekly sanitation service, the large truck was absent from (and could never have fit on) the narrow streets of Magiwa subdivision.

We knew what other people did with their trash, but we kept hoping that another solution would present itself.

Another week passed, and no truck arrived. We could stand the presence of the garbage no longer. When the streets were dark enough to disguise our mission, we gathered the trash bags and carried them the half block to the bus stop.

Here, by the side of a road where hundreds of people passed every day, was the dumping ground for the neighborhood. There were always at least two goats chomping busily on morsels from the brightly colored mound of rotting garbage. With a flush of guilt, we added our garbage to the pile.

My guilt, however, stemmed from more than the act of littering. I was appalled at the amount of garbage I produced.

I remembered one of my first days living with a Kenyan family in another suburb of Nairobi, when I searched the house for a trash can. Organic scraps went in to the compost bucket in the kitchen, but there was no place to put paper and plastic garbage. I began saving my trash to dispose of in town because of my embarrassment that I alone produced more garbage than the family of six I lived with.

What did they do with the wrappers and cans and papers that inevitably accompany urban consumerism? Every night the plastic bread bags and plastic wrap used for lunch-time sandwiches were washed, dried and set aside for the next day. Paper was used to start the jeko (small coal stove), and bottles were returned to the store in exchange for a few shillings. Extra food was saved or fed to the chickens as compost.

Tin cans, plastic peanut butter jars and waxed milk cartons seemed to be the only unrecycled items in the house. I don't know what was done with this trash, but I do know there was not much of it.

In the United States and other Western countries, the common practice is first to generate a terrific amount of garbage and then to stow away, sweep away, carry away, compact and bury the unsightly and the smelly. The American public has a low tolerance for items on the second go-around, especially when flashy new replicas can be bought cheaply.

"Out of sight, out of mind." Garbage cans now have lids with swinging doors to allow clean and efficient disposal, with as little contact with the garbage as possible. The thrown-away

paper gives no heat, the styrofoam containers hold only one hamburger, the bottles carry just one load.

The average American creates 4 pounds of garbage a day. (The daily average for a Calcuttan is only 1 1/8 pounds.) Indiscriminate disposal is a privilege that many people in the United States take for granted. It is also a privilege that is shortlived. Americans are going to have to get personal with their trash.

Potential landfill sites are increasingly scarce. Protests against locating sites near people's homes illustrate the public demand for high quality a environment at an unrealistically low price. Half of the landfills in use eight years ago have since been filled up, and many of those still in service are overloaded.

Fresh Kills Landfill in New York is currently 150 feet high and is expected to reach 500 feet before it is closed.

It is estimated that half the volume of America's trash is from packaging materials. Groups pressure manufacturers to use recyclable packages, but the real choice lies with the consumer. Plastic silverware, disposable diapers (16 billion are produced annually in the United States), disposal tubes and bottles and boxes can be bypassed for a simpler, more environmentally viable and probably cheaper option.

Garbage cans now have lids with swinging doors to allow clean and efficient disposal, with as little contact with the garbage as possible.

In Norway consumers are charged for plastic shopping bags, and nonrecyclable plastic and glass containers have been banned in Denmark for 11 years. There are beginnings of a revolution against plastic packaging in the United States, too; in 1987 12 states banned or proposed bans on nondegradable plastics, including egg cartons, six-pack rings, tampon applicators and diapers.

Bottles and bags made of a cornstarch-plastic bonded material — biodegradable plastic — are being commercially marketed in other countries. Research on the recycling potential of plastics also has been successful. Consumer support for products and practices such as these can change the packaging of American products.

Industry will rush to produce what people will buy. If mothers demand

degradable diapers, then manufacturers will make them. If shoppers refuse plastic grocery bags, industry will accommodate.

Americans are lucky to be able to afford places to put their trash other than the neighborhood bus stop. But unless more attention is paid to the source of that garbage — packaging and wasteful habits — and to its best disposal — recycling — that privilege will be buried with the last landfill.

Market forces are powerful. Americans must tap into them and change industry. Citizens can make a difference, and they must, because no goats are going to eat away the problem of the overflow of garbage in the United States.

Karen Wood is a freelance writer and a volunteer at the Alaska Health Project, headquartered in Anchorage.