

NORTHWEST EARTH INSTITUTE ECO-TIPS

PRECYCLING PACKAGING

It's no secret that Americans lead hectic lives. Our jobs, families, and personal interests seem to demand more time and energy than we have. We are also creatures of convenience. We eat in fast-food restaurants, drink bottled beverages, and buy processed foods for our own tables. The trouble is that while we are buying time for the present, we are selling out our future.

The culprit, of course, is packaging. You can see it strewn along our roadsides and washed up on our beaches. It is filling up our landfills at an alarming rate. And it requires cutting more trees and drilling more oil. For example, the resource requirements of making microwavable instant meals, with their disposable pans and multi-layer wrappings, are about ten times larger than preparing the same dishes at home from scratch.

The solution begins with awareness. When you are eating away from home or shopping, make note of all the bags, boxes, cartons, bottles, plastic wrap, and other packaging that will end up in your garbage can. Then begin thinking about what is good for the environment before making your next purchases. Ask yourself what will happen to the package when you are finished with it. Can it be recycled? Will it decompose in the environment if you throw it away? Or will it become a nuisance for your children's children? The process of asking these questions is called precycling.

TIPS TO PRACTICE PRECYCLING PACKAGING

- Carry your own reusable bag for your purchases. Canvas or nylon bags are ideal for keeping handy in the car; net bags are convenient because they don't take up much space in a purse or briefcase. Most stores give a credit, usually a nickel.
- While in the store, say, "I don't need a bag" to the checker whenever possible. Extra plastic bags for frozen items may not be necessary. Produce can often be left loose in the shopping basket.
- Select products that have little or no wrapping or are packaged in materials you can recycle.
- When you have a choice, select the package that has the higher value for recycling, for example a paper bag rather than plastic or a glass bottle rather than plastic. Glass bottles can be recycled indefinitely whereas plastic will likely be down-cycled (recycled into a lower grade item and then end up in a landfill).
- Shop where you can buy in bulk: a food store where you can scoop rice into your own bag; a hardware store where you can select unpackaged supplies; a meat market where the cuts are not prepackaged.



- Avoid packages made of plastic unless they are the types you recycle in your community.
- Avoid packages made of several layers of different materials that can't be separated (such as juice boxes made of paper, plastic, and aluminum).
- Avoid individually packaged products, such as pre-measured packets of cereal, each for a single serving.
- Select restaurants that use washable plates, cups, and utensils.
- Carry your own coffee mug with you for takeout beverages.
- Pack your own lunch, using durable containers.

Americans tossed out more than 37 million tons of containers and packaging in 2001—an increase of 270 percent since 1960. These containers account for about half of the total volume of household waste. It is an enormous problem. But, each of us can make a difference with just a few small changes in our habits.

If you're willing to do more, tell store managers what kinds of packaging you prefer. Complain to companies that overpackage or that use packages that are not recyclable or biodegradable. If enough people do this, the current unsustainable practices will change.