Two new toolkits for solid waste activists have just been published. One is from Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), one from Greenpeace. Both offer useful materials that can help local activists fight for waste prevention and reduction, increased recycling and composting, and an end to incineration and dangerous landfilling. Each toolkit contains useful information available nowhere else, and we recommend them both highly.

EDF’s contribution is a 320-page book called RECYCLING AND INCINERATION; EVALUATING THE CHOICES and it will help you and your local officials do just that—evaluate the choices between recycling and incineration. Where the EDF study places least emphasis—on solid waste prevention—the Greenpeace offering is strongest, so between them they give activists a powerful and fairly complete new set of tools to use at the local level. The Greenpeace package is called Greenpeace Action Garbage Prevention Plan. The text of the Greenpeace Plan is only 15 pages but it is accompanied by copies of nine local ordinances that your town or county government could adopt to prevent the garbage problem rather than manage the garbage problem.

The problem of garbage has become the central issue of our time. Taking out the garbage is the activity in our lives that brings each of us face-to-face with the destruction of our planet. The unraveling of earth’s ozone layer, global warming, regionalscale destruction of forest, lake and farm by acid rain, and a thorough dosing of the entire planet (and contamination of our own bodies) with pesticides, industrial waste and toxic metals—all have occurred in the name of giving consumers a “high standard of living.” But focus carefully on the leftovers from your high standard of living—in your garbage pail—and you will find yourself face to face with the crack of doom. To avoid the end of life as we know it, we must each rethink, reexamine, redevalue—some things we can change by making different choices in our personal lives and at the store, but some things will require us to look upstream, toward the source of these problems in the manufacturer’s Board room, to find out how things got the way they are.

The fundamental problem is private decisions to use toxic materials that have very far-reaching public consequences. The use of toxic materials in the manufacture of household goods poisons workers, produces hazardous industrial wastes, introduces toxic fumes into our homes, and ultimately makes landfills dangerous, which in turn forces some people to look (mysteriously) to incineration for solutions. The choice to use toxic materials in consumer goods is made by private manufacturers for private motives (most of which boil down to monetary gain) behind closed doors. The further this is true, the more they realize that for the health of the environment and at the store, but some things will require us to look upstream, toward the source of these problems in the manufacturer’s Board room, to find out how things got the way they are.

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The disposal of the toxic ash from incinerators is given a thorough treatment (don’t overlook Appendix B). EDF’s scientists examine and reject schemes for the “re-use” of ash for making roads or buildings.

Another good chapter is “Important Elements of a Solid Waste Plan” which can help you and your local government plan out a waste avoidance and waste management strategy.

It is clear from this book that, though EDF does not take an anti-incineration position, very few—if any—incinerators would be built if citizens and local officials read this book and took it seriously. For out-and-out incineration fighters, it’s a gem.


--Peter Montague

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