

State of **the Planet**

SUSTAINABILITY

The Aftermath of China's Waste Ban

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What will happen to our waste now that China isn't taking it? Photo: Alan Levine via Flickr CC

By **Alice Roche-Naude**

At the beginning of January 2019, the Chinese Ministry of Ecology and Environment announced that it would be expanding its ban on importing waste. The initial ban, adopted in 2018, outlawed 24 types of recyclables and solid waste from entering the country. It also toughened

the standards on impurities levels in imported waste materials, making them almost impossible to comply with. With the 2019 extension, Beijing has widened the ban to encompass 32 types of scraps for recycling and reuse including post-consumer plastics such as our shampoo or soda bottles.

The initial ban created a worldwide headache as scrap managers in the United States, Europe and Japan suddenly lost access to their main recycling market. The new version of the ban will surely lead to migraines.

China has been the world's dumpster for almost 50 years. Importing and recycling scraps has allowed China's factories to access cheap materials and support its emerging economy. Since 1992, [more than two-thirds](#) of the world's plastic waste has ended up in China, according to a study in *Science Advances*. And this only accounts for plastic.

China, now the world's second-largest economy, produces significant amounts of its own waste and is now putting in extra efforts to enforce recycling within its borders. While recyclables can be valuable for Chinese manufacturers, recycling is generating more garbage and pollution through energy-intensive processes and contaminated bales of imported waste. By closing its doors to foreign scraps, Beijing hopes the ban will have a positive impact on local concerns such as water and air pollution, and help ["to protect China's environmental interests and people's health"](#).

The Western world — including the United States — has relied on China for years to take care of its scraps. With this abrupt policy shift, many countries are realizing that they lack the means to recycle their own waste at home.

In response to the ban, the global trade price of many scrap materials plummeted and the international frustration toward China's decision was proportional to the West's panic. The Western world accused China of making a hasty decision that will lead to a global increase in pollution, as materials that could have been recycled will likely end up in landfills or incinerators and contribute to the generation of greenhouse gas emissions.

The biggest exporters of waste are also the most ill-equipped to respond to the Chinese foreign waste ban. "[The United States] are producing an enormous amount of plastic material that we don't know how to handle," said John Hocevar, ocean campaign director for Greenpeace USA, [in an article with the Guardian](#).

According to the World Bank, global waste generation is expected to increase by 70 percent, from 2 billion tonnes per year in 2016 to 3.4 billion tonnes per year in 2050. The Ocean Conservancy warns that without a drastic reduction in waste generation, by 2050 there could be more plastic than fish in the world's seas.

To avoid having to deal with their own trash in their own backyard, the Western world is now shipping its recyclables over to countries such as Malaysia, Vietnam and India.

In the long term, the problem will need to be solved at the source with conscious efforts to reduce waste.

As of yet, countries in Southeast Asia do not have the capacity to recycle so much of our waste, nor do they have the regulatory infrastructure to prevent illegal dumping. But as the saying goes, "out of sight, out of mind."

Recyclers and trade bodies such as the Institute of Scraps Recycling Industries defend that they are 'not dumping waste on Southeast Asia' because of a legitimate market for scraps. In 2016 alone, \$5.6 billion in scrap commodities were exported from the United States to China, according to the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries.

The University of Georgia reports that by keeping foreign waste out, China is expected to displace 111 million metric tons of plastic trash by 2030; that's the equivalent of more than 300 Empire State Buildings. But sending scraps offshore is only a short-term solution. The United States and Europe need to think of alternatives to dumping in Southeast Asian countries, which will most likely follow in China's footsteps regarding waste policy. Malaysia has already been revoking import permits and in May 2018, Vietnam temporarily banned foreign plastic waste as its docks were overwhelmed.

In the long term, the problem will need to be solved at the source with conscious efforts to reduce waste. We can all take measures to reduce waste. But ultimately, consumers are not the root of the problem. Businesses are. Consumers have little control over the packaging that accompanies the items they buy; packaging-free options are still too scarce and for now accessible to only a small share of the population that has time and money to allocate to their green conscience. The China waste ban should really be a wake-up call for businesses to design better, long-lasting products. Companies need to take responsibility for their products, from conception to disposal. That means taking back used packaging, reusing and recycling it where possible, and ultimately disposing of it in a responsible manner — instead of passing on the migraine of waste management to the rest of the world.

Alice Roche-Naude is a graduate student in Columbia University's Sustainability Management program. She has a background in sustainability consulting and worked with both the public and private sector on a wide range of topics including waste traceability and auditing.



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