



Written by [Brooke Williamsen](#) on June 5, 2012

Curbside Recycling Fails at Being “Green”

This article was originally entitled “Curbside Recycling Is Not Important” and was written by a sixth grader as a class project — it’s worth reading.

All of you may have read or heard that polar bear populations are plummeting because of global warming. You may have even seen a video that claims to show a polar bear dying from global warming. But according to the [U.S. government and top polar bear scientists](#), this is not true. In fact, according to, “a 2002 U.S. Geological Survey of wildlife in the Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain ... polar bear populations ‘may now be near historic highs.’” Also, Canadian biologist Dr. Mitchell Taylor the director of wildlife research with the Arctic government of Nunavut said, “Of the 13 populations of polar bears in Canada, 11 are stable or increasing in number. They are not going extinct or even appear to be affected at present.” He’s backed up by Dennis Compayre who has studied polar bears for 30 years, “There are as many bears here [in Northern Canada] now as there were when I was a kid.” In fact, there is no evidence that polar bears will disappear from global warming. Polar bears have lived through the medieval times, which were far warmer than any temperatures that global-warming people are worried about. A lady who studies animal history, Dr. Susan Crockford said, “There is no evidence to suggest that the polar bear or its food supply is in danger of disappearing entirely with increased Arctic warming, regardless of the dire fairy-tale scenarios predicted by computer models.” Many of you have also heard that curbside recycling reduces energy usage, conserves resources, and reduces pollution, but that is not true either.



It may seem logical that someday we will run out of natural resources such as fossil fuels, used to make plastic, trees to make paper, and other raw materials used to make products such as aluminum cans



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and that running out of such things would be horrific. But often things that seem logical aren't. Every school kid knows that recycling paper saves trees, right? Wrong! Making paper may actually cause more trees to be grown. A large reason for growing trees is so that people can make money. Just one paper company in the United States, called International Paper, owned over [1,000 square miles of forests](#). Roy E. Cordato, vice president for research and resident scholar at the John Locke Foundation, said in his paper "[Don't Recycle: Throw It Away](#)," "If we stopped using paper, there would be fewer trees planted. In the paper industry, 87% of the trees used are planted to produce paper. For every 13 trees 'saved' by recycling, 87 will never get planted. It is because of the demand for paper that the number of trees has been increasing in this country for the last 50 years." What he is saying is that supply meets demand. If people suddenly stopped using dairy products and eating beef, the population of cows would decrease because people raise cows to produce those products to sell. If people don't buy the cow products, farmers don't make the money and few people would want cows to raise anymore. We are not likely to run out of coal, natural gas, or oil either, which are all things that we could make plastic out of. The U.S. Geological Survey, a U.S. Government agency, just tested a recently discovered oil field near Colorado called the Green River formation to find out how much oil was in it. They found out that the oil could provide [1,500 years worth of fuel](#) for America using presently available drilling techniques. Also, this is just one oil field, new oil fields are discovered around the world every year. The Energy Information Agency, another U.S. Government agency, states that the U.S. coal supply can provide [250 years worth of coal](#) for the United States (which can be made into oil). The Potential Gas Committee, a group of experts who work in the natural-gas field, estimate that the United States has enough natural gas to satisfy America's consumption for natural gas for [100 years](#), and more natural-gas fields are found every year. Also, the U.S. government has just announced that it is close to developing the technology that would allow them to tap into methane hydrate deposits. These are natural-gas deposits that are locked in ice. The government estimates that [methane hydrates will be able to supply 280-2,920 years](#) of natural gas for America. Moreover, even in the distant future, if we were to run out of these fuels, there would surely be a replacement. Scientists have already found out how to [make algae, a water plant, into oil](#). The scientists are just working on how to grow the algae fast enough. By the time we run out of fossil fuels, they will know how to grow it fast enough. Another concern of people who are worried about running out of resources is a shortage of landfill space. But if all of the solid waste for the next thousand years were put into a single space, it would take up only 44 square miles of landfill space.

Recycling doesn't save energy as compared to using virgin raw materials either. Most recycling websites talk about the benefits of recycling and claim that recycling saves lots of energy. The websites claim recycling aluminum requires 95 percent less energy than making brand new aluminum. Or that recycling paper saves 64 percent more energy than brand new paper. Or that recycling plastic saves up to 60 percent more energy than making brand new plastic. However, an [Ohio State University fact sheet](#) said, "The average saving ... does not include added energy costs of collection and transportation." When the energy of recycling collection is figured out, recycling actually uses more energy. Curbside collection of recycling materials uses lots of energy. One way that it uses lots of energy is in the making of recycling trucks, which are made out of steel, which consume lots of energy to make. And these trucks have limited life spans. After awhile the trucks are going to break and need to be replaced. Another way recycling uses lots more energy than disposal is the fuel used to run the trucks. For every trip to the landfill to haul plastic, paper, and aluminum as trash, it would take [5-10 trips to the recycling center](#). This is because when plastic, paper, and aluminum are put in a garbage



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truck, they are compacted together so that much garbage can be hauled in one load. But when recyclables are hauled in a recycling truck, they are not compacted together because when the recyclables get to a recycling center, material that is not recyclable has to be sorted and removed. Experts who study this matter know that it costs a lot more to recycle. One of these experts is Leland E. Teschler, the editor of an engineering website, who said in his paper "[Save Energy: Don't Recycle](#)," "The issue has been closely examined by the Franklin Associates Div. of the Eastern Research Group. Franklin has for years prepared the national characterization of municipal solid waste published by U.S. EPA. It also has looked at the cost per ton of handling recyclables through curbside pickup. One of Franklin's conclusions is that curbside recycling typically costs 55% more than simple disposal because it consumes huge amounts of capital and labor per pound of recycled material." It is obvious that recycling costs more than disposing because if recycling were beneficial, citizens wouldn't be charged for pick-up. (Most people are charged on their tax bills.) Plastic, paper, and aluminum companies buy raw materials, and if recyclables saved energy, then these companies could buy the recyclables cheaper than the raw materials, and cities or businesses could collect the recyclables and sell them to plastic, paper, and aluminum makers for less than the cost of typical raw materials.

The main reason why people think curbside recycling is important is because they think recycling keeps the planet cleaner and keeps material out of landfills and keeps it from being burned or otherwise becoming pollution. But the truth is all plastics and papers, which are the materials that most people consider to be pollutants, end up in the landfill, burned, or disposed of some other way anyway. This is because no plastic or paper can be recycled unlimited times. Plastics can only be recycled a couple of times. The [Eureka recycling company wrote](#), "Plastic resin has limited ability to be recycled because its quality degrades every time it is reheated. When we collect and remanufacture plastic, we are only delaying its disposal. The final destination for all plastic is either an incinerator ... or a landfill." The Eureka company went on, "Most milk jugs, soda bottles, and water bottles are turned into lower-grade products such as fill, fleece, carpet, toys, or plastic lumber." Then the plastic goes to the landfill or is burned. Even when plastic is recycled, it's worth so little that it's [shipped over to China](#) because the labor used to process it is so cheap there. And in China they have hardly any environmental rules, so when the plastic scraps are melted, the workers get poisoned. The Chinese also dump the recycling [gunk all over the ground there](#). It isn't put into proper landfills. The other main product that people are worried about causing pollution in our world is paper. But just like plastic, paper can't keep being used again and again. John Klungness, a Forest Products Laboratory chemical engineer [said](#), "Paper fibers lose strength with each recycling, and fail after seven cycles. As the overall recycling percentage rises, so does the proportion of fibers that have been recycled seven times." So the paper products quickly end up being disposed of. And much paper never gets recycled seven times. Some of the [best products to make using recycled paper](#) are tissue paper, toilet paper, and paper towels, and those products obviously aren't recycled. They are immediately disposed of.

My paper shows that much of what students learn in school is just plain wrong. Some people teach incorrect things because they don't know any better, some people do it for personal reasons, and some people do it to make money. Students must always find things out for themselves if they want to know if the information they are learning is true or not.



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