

Enough of the rubbish

The Cape Times of the 25th April 2007 carried the story of a local man who encountered difficulties when trying to dispose of toxic waste. He was advised by a council official that he should discard of this waste (poisons, old medicine, pesticides and old batteries) in his bin, as everyone else does.



Janine Johnston, passionate about the "green revolution".

So this hazardous waste, along with every Capetonian's average 2kg of daily waste, made its way to one of the three remaining landfills around the Mother City (Coastal Park in Muizenberg area, Bellville and Vissershoeek) – all of which are just about filled to capacity. Given that Cape Town produces 5000 – 6000 tons of waste a day, these landfill sites are under tremendous pressure. Rustim Karaan, director of solid waste in the city, told delegates at the Cape Town Waste Minimization Summit (11 April 2007) that local landfill sites designed to last 20 years are filling up in half that time!

South Africa has a long way to go to reach the government's tough goals on environmental sustainability, set at the World Summit in Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, that includes a 50% reduction in the volume of hazardous waste generated and a 25% reduction in volumes of landfill waste by 2012 – along with an optimistic zero waste situation by 2022, writes Janine Johnston*.

About 90% of our waste is being thrown away as useless, even though between 70 and 80% of this derives from non-renewable resources and could be recycled and used again. Recyclable rubbish is buried alongside loads of e-waste (electronics), white waste (electrical parts), and toxic waste (from industrial processes) oil, scrap metal and building rubble.

Rubbish dumps are compacted and covered daily and have to adhere to minimum requirements, based on international regulation. These are still toxic time bombs – landfill sites form a toxic juice called leachates, which leak into the earth and can cause great harm to our groundwater. The lack of air and sunlight to the dumps inhibits the decomposing process! Furthermore, landfill sites are major greenhouse gas emission culprits. The explosive methane gas produced in the process is a greater contributor to global warming than carbon dioxide.

This stink of a problem, does present an opportunity to generate electricity in the future. Alternative energy is being tapped from only one landfill site in the whole of Africa: at Mariannhill in KwaZulu Natal, which began generating electricity at the beginning of March 2007. It is expected to produce 1000kW of electricity that is to be sold back onto the national grid. The site is also the only landfill conservancy in the world, with a public forest and grassland and a newly established wetland!

Considering that South African municipalities report over R195 million a year is spent on litter abatement, our citizens are notoriously lax about waste minimization in comparison with other countries where recycling is a part of domestic culture.

Currently only 14% of the City of Cape Town's waste is recycled. Mark Swilling, head of the Sustainability Institute at the University of Stellenbosch says that Cape Town has 900 000 households, of which 28% are middle income earners and 14% are rich. The rich generate between 40 and 50% of the waste.

This is due to the lack of services and infrastructure to shift from traditional waste disposal to waste management. The major challenge faced in the recovery of recyclable waste is that "separation at source" is not enforced or encouraged. If every citizen would take personal responsibility for their own mess – it would save some unfortunate collectors from digging PET (plastic bottles used mostly for beverage packaging) and the likes from landfills.

The best scenario would be that our efforts are supported by local authorities, through the provision of services in our communities to simplify waste minimization. This also presents an opportunity to create jobs and encourage entrepreneurship while preserving our environment.

But in the meantime, have recycle bins at home and office; locate your nearest drop site – The Oasis Project and Footprints are excellent Cape Town community initiatives worth your support (both of these are job creation community initiatives). There are another 21 drop off sites in Cape Town; contact City of Cape Town's Waste Wise Program for information.

If concerned citizens all make some concerted effort and enough noise to encourage local action, we soon will have the Cape back in shape!

Did you know?

- Recycling metals uses 90% less energy than creating new ones and metal can be recycled over and over again.
- Commercial and residential paper makes up to 40% of land-filling waste. Eliminating this would mean doubling the life span of our landfills.
- Plastic is one of the best inventions of our time, but the hardest to get rid of. One bottle can take up to 10,000 years to degrade.
- To create one cell phone, 75kg resources are used and a toothbrush takes 1.5 kg of resources.

Green spring clean

Johnston says that it's important to select organic food wherever possible.

Chemicals are present in our homes, our food, our water, the toiletries and cosmetics we use, even in the air that we breathe. With over 70,000 in existence, it may come as a shock to discover over 85% of the commonly used chemicals that we encounter so regularly have not even had minimum safety testing and there is no obligation on the chemical industry to properly assess the chemicals they sell or to use safer alternatives. Only you can affect this, by becoming informed and selecting products that are chemical free.

The most important and easiest step is to choose organic food whenever you can. This is also the tastiest and most nutritious choice you can make.

If not available, pay close attention to the ingredients listed on product – less is more; and if you have a hard time

pronouncing them, your body and the environment will probably have a hard time breaking them down. Choose free-range and additive free as the next best thing to organic.

Many common cleaning products have been formulated using harsh chemical ingredients; and are likely to contain toxic ingredients: bleach, brass or other metal polishes, drain cleaner, carpet cleaner, room deodorizer, dishwashing detergent, fabric softener, laundry detergent, anti-cling sheets, mould and mildew cleaner, mothballs and spot remover all usually contain irritating or toxic substances. However, you will probably not find the ingredients on the labels, and if you do they will be disguised by category names that leave you none the wiser.

Keeping a clean home, no longer has to kill you! Natural, biodegradable and safe cleaning products have become widely available. You can even facelift your home with a fresh coat of paint; and make the natural choice. Environmentally – friendly paints are available nationally.

Your kitchen waste can be recycled into rich compost to feed your spring garden. If worms give you the squirms, organic garden care and plant feeds can be found in your local garden centre. There's no better time than now to start your own food garden – and it may turn out to be the most rewarding hobby of the Season!

Plant an indigenous, water-wise garden

While you're outside, why not consider implementing a water recycling system. Your grey water (from washing machine and bath) can be used to water your garden and cut your bill dramatically, while preserving this resource.

Every action you take makes a positive contribution to your health and your environment. So go ahead, give your home the green spring clean!

Did you know?

More than 90% of the personal care products on the market, products you and your family probably use, contain potentially harmful ingredients. You can find these in ingredients in toothpaste, shampoos, conditioners, moisturizers, sunscreens, deodorants, and the list goes on.

Some especially potentially harmful ingredients you should check your labels for are:

- Sodium lauryl sulphate – found in foaming agents (shampoos, conditioner, body wash, toothpaste); claimed to cause permanent damage to eyes, especially children; easily permeates skin, enters blood stream and lodges in the heart, lungs, liver and brain
- Petrolatum: mineral oil, petroleum jelly, baby oil – petroleum derivatives; barrier forming and therefore prevents elimination of toxins (the skin is the largest body organ of elimination), claimed to strip body's natural oils and contribute to premature ageing
- Parabens: found in many body lotions and face creams; mimics oestrogens in the body; cancers are fed by oestrogens – parabens therefore been recognized by many experts as major contributor to vast rise of cancers in society
- Talc: found in baby powders, body powders and face powders; claimed to be a major cause of ovarian cancer and lodges in the lungs and aggravates respiratory disorders
- EDTA: Stabilizers found in bleach and detergents irritate skin and mucous membranes

**Janine Johnston is the Exhibition Manager for the Natural and Organic Products Exhibition.*