

A scenic landscape photograph of a river flowing through a forested valley. In the foreground, large, layered rock formations are visible. The river flows through the center, surrounded by dense evergreen trees. In the background, snow-capped mountains rise against a blue sky with light clouds. The text "WE CAN GO BEYOND RECYCLING TO ZERO WASTE." is overlaid in the center in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font with a black outline.

**WE CAN GO  
BEYOND RECYCLING  
TO ZERO WASTE.**

# DO WE REALLY WANT TO BE KNOWN AS A THROWAWAY SOCIETY?

## Beyond Recycling: Zero Waste...or darn close

Recycling is a daily habit for millions of people and a commitment for thousands of communities. But despite recycling's success, our industries are using too many toxic materials and making more

For every garbage can placed at the curb, the equivalent of 71 garbage cans' worth of waste is created in mining, logging, agriculture, oil and gas exploration, and the industrial processes used to convert raw materials into finished products and packaging. This doesn't even include the extra energy usage and climate change impacts resulting from resource extraction and processing.



1 = 71

disposable products and excess packaging than ever. The current industrial system is based on a one-way flow of materials, often extracted from pristine natural areas. These resources are used to make short-lived products that are destroyed in landfills and incinerators, creating pollution and forever losing the value of the material.

Communities are not recovering what could be recovered through recycling, but even if they were it wouldn't be enough to stop the destruction of our environment, natural resources, and wildlife. It's time to go beyond recycling and deal with waste at the source—at the design and production stages. We need to reconfigure our one-way industrial system into a circular, closed-loop system, recycling resources back into our communities and pursuing a goal of Zero Waste.

**What is Zero Waste?** Our society's consumption and use of products is inevitable. But it is not inevitable that these activities result in environmental devastation or mountains of waste. Waste is a result of poor product design, inefficient markets that encourage wasting, and failure to recognize discards as resources.

Zero Waste seeks to redesign the way resources and materials flow through society, taking a 'whole system' approach. Zero Waste means drastically reducing the extraction of new resources and reducing waste at the source by designing products that are non-toxic and can be reused, repaired, or recycled back into nature or back into the marketplace – and stimulating the marketplace to use those materials.

Gaining momentum around the world, Zero Waste offers positive alternatives to how we currently use our dwindling natural resources. Zero Waste speaks to all environmental protection concerns: air, water, soil, and species. Zero Waste gradually replaces landfills and incinerators with sustainable enterprises that create local jobs and increase community self-sufficiency.

## Zero Waste Communities: From Managing Waste to Managing Resources

Communities can pursue Zero Waste by first setting a goal of eliminating rather than managing waste.

This simple step can lead to breakthroughs when resources and the creativity of the community, policy-makers, and engineers are redirected to developing solutions based on providing clean streams of resources to local entrepreneurs.

Zero Waste is in the community interest because it transforms a liability (waste) into an asset (resources) that yields local economic benefits.

## Zero Waste Businesses and Industry

Zero Waste combines common sense practices with a solid economic vision for business. It offers businesses a way to improve their efficiency and competitiveness while reducing waste disposal costs. To attain Zero Waste, industry must redesign products with a focus on the entire lifecycle of the product, including the use of environmentally sustainable raw materials and product longevity. Rather than shifting responsibility for their waste to communities and taxpayers, companies must develop reverse distribution systems to take their products back for reuse.

**Zero Waste Policies** Today, almost everything is technically recoverable. But we remain a throw-away society because taxpayer subsidies make it cheaper to extract virgin materials than recover discarded ones. We fail to include the costs of pollution and environmental destruction in the prices of products. Manufacturers have little incentive to make sustainable products and packaging as long as they avoid—and taxpayers and local government assume—responsibility for the costs of disposing those products at the end of their useful lives.

Zero Waste communities require incentives, policies, and infrastructures that favor source-separation and recovery of discarded materials. Government intervention is needed, not to manage waste, but to change the rules and 'level the playing field' so that resource-conserving businesses can enjoy their natural advantages and out-compete resource-wasting businesses.

## Advocating Zero Waste: GrassRoots Recycling Network

The GrassRoots Recycling Network is a North American network of waste reduction activists and professionals dedicated to achieving a sustainable economy based on the principle of Zero Waste. Join us in our efforts to get to Zero. Find out how your community can become a Zero Waste community by visiting our website at [www.grn.org](http://www.grn.org) or calling 706-613-7121.

## The Road to Zero: Five Key Elements of Zero Waste

**Invest in Community Recovery Systems.** Zero Waste communities invest in asset recovery systems, such as Resource Recovery Parks, that stimulate innovation and create incentives for local entrepreneurs to process clean reusables, recyclables, and compostables.

**Create Jobs and Sustainable Communities.** Wasting resources wastes jobs because it removes resources from commerce. Zero Waste helps local economies become more self-sufficient and creates opportunities for civic participation and sustainable employment.


**Redesign Products.** Manufacturers design non-toxic products that can be safely reintroduced to commerce or nature.

**Producers Take Responsibility.** Manufacturers take responsibility for their products at the end of useful life, creating the incentive to design cleaner, durable, and recyclable products.

**End Subsidies for Waste.** Resource policies are changed at every level so that resource-conserving enterprises can use their inherent advantages to out-compete resource-wasting industries.

"About 94% of the materials extracted for use in manufacturing durable products become waste before the product is manufactured... 80% of what we make is thrown away within six months of production."

— Paul Hawken, *Natural Capitalism*



**"Zero Waste can help communities achieve a local economy that operates efficiently, sustains good jobs, and provides a measure of self-sufficiency."**

— Peter Montague, editor of *Rachel's Environment & Health Weekly*

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