

ENVIRONMENT ISSUES: Pollution and Waste

What is pollution?

Pollution is something that damages or contaminates the environment. It can be in the form of land, air or water pollution and is especially attributed to man-made waste. Pollution can have long-lasting effects on the environment and ecosystems, and can affect the future of our planet. It includes things like acid rain, pesticides and even litter.

The waste we create in our homes and things we throw away are also a form of pollution! Waste can have a negative impact on the environment as well, if it is not managed correctly. Over 530 million tonnes of waste is produced in the UK every year and nearly 30 million tonnes of that is thrown away from households annually. That's enough to fill a line of double-decker buses stretching from London, UK, to Sydney, Australia, and back!

What happens to waste?

Have you ever considered what is being done with the waste you produce? The majority of the waste we throw away ends up in landfills—big pits dug into the ground (sometimes gravel pits or quarries) used for the purpose of storing waste. Rubbish is then compacted down with machines and covered with soil.

Landfills produce the gas methane, caused as a result of rotting food. Methane is twenty times more hazardous than carbon dioxide in harming our atmosphere and is said to be contributing to global warming. While most rubbish eventually decomposes, some materials (such as styrofoam or plastics) are not able to decompose, especially without exposure to oxygen, and thus stay practically unaltered.

Another solution to dealing with waste is incineration or burning. In this scenario, all that is left of the waste is ashes. However, this can also be harmful for the environment due to the gases emitted from burning.

Waste as energy

One way that waste can be used in a positive way is by using an incineration process to create energy. Incinerated waste can be used as fuel for electricity to heat our homes, offices and schools. Special 'Waste for Energy' plants do this by treating and compressing the gas released, which can be used to produce electricity and heating. Experts have noted that using rubbish as a source of energy could contribute to one fifth of the UK's renewable energy sources in the next decade.



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What is the Government doing about waste?

A National Waste Strategy produced by the Government outlines how England, Wales and Scotland are dealing with the increasing amount of waste produced each year. This strategy includes things such as:

- encouraging public places like shopping centres, exhibition centres and airports to have recycling facilities alongside rubbish bins
- encouraging local authorities that don't currently offer on-street recycling to do so
- partnering with large retail outlets, such as supermarkets, to reduce the number of carrier bags used over the last few years by 50%. This has brought down CO₂ emissions by 130,000 tonnes annually – the equivalent of taking 41,000 cars off the road
- consulting with industry leaders about producers' responsibility to reduce the amount of packaging in products, and increasing recycling targets
- introducing financial incentives for households to recycle and reduce the amount of waste produced. Incentives will vary from one local authority to another and any money raised will be put back into such schemes.



Did you know?

- The amount of rubbish produced in the UK annually would fill up the Royal Albert Hall in London over 4,300 times!
- Each person in the UK throws away an average of seven times their body weight (500 kg) each year.