



# CHASING ARROWS

BY LAURIE LAMOUNTAIN

**F**our months into the pandemic, I drove down to Florida and brought my mother back to Maine. We converted a post-and-beam art studio in our backyard into a cozy cottage so that she could have her own space, including a make-shift kitchen with a two-burner cooktop and a microwave oven. It was then that my mother, who had always made her own meals, discovered the ease of frozen dinners and packaged foods. And it was then that it dawned on me that the recycling bin in the garage was filling up three times faster than it had in the past.

The fact that we previously generated so little trash was something of a point of pride that came with very little effort. For one thing, I cook. Cooking from scratch in itself is an effective means to reducing waste. I also make my own yogurt and preserve what I can of summer's bounty. Sharing a compost bin with the neighbor further reduced the amount of waste we brought to the transfer station. Finally, I live with someone who is

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adamantly opposed to on-line shopping.

But then came those frozen dinners. Who knew that in addition to the outer cardboard box, there were two plastic "bowls" inside containing the dinner? They were what made me more aware of, and subsequently obsessed with, the level of single-use plastic in our culture. Frozen dinners were just the tip of the iceberg. I began to ponder the amount of plastic waste generated from one plane trip, one outdoor concert at Thompson Point, one day at Maine Medical Center, or, because I had a lot more time on my hands, one pandemic. It was daunting, but at least I was doing the right thing by recycling, right? Let's just say, it's complicated.

The town I live in is one of more than seventy participating municipalities in Maine whose recycling efforts are met by ecomaine, a nonprofit comprehensive waste disposal and recycling organization based in Portland that introduced single-sort recycling to Maine in 2007. Since then, they have by their accounts recycled more than one billion pounds of paper, cardboard, plastic, metal, and glass (which translates to 540,000 tons that didn't end up in landfills) into paper products, cardboard boxes, hardware, bike parts, cans, plastic bottles, jugs, shirts, and even park benches. More than 1,300 waste items in the ecomaine Recyclopedia are among the 35,000+ tons of recyclables they process each year.

Maine has consistently been on the forefront when it comes to enacting legislation to protect the environment. The Maine "Bottle Bill," enacted in 1978, is a hugely successful recycling program for glass, aluminum, and plastic beverage containers that has gone a long way to keeping Maine's roads and highways litter-free. And on July 1st of 2021, a bill banning single-use plastic carry-out bags was signed into effect by Governor Mills. Twelve days later, the governor signed LD 1541 into law, making Maine the first state to pass an Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) for Packaging law, requiring big corporations and manufacturers to help pay for the cost of recycling their wasteful packaging. Nate Cronauer, who is one of three environmental educators at ecomaine, says they supported the EPR bill, along with the Natural Resources Council of Maine, because it incentivizes manufacturers to produce less packaging and in doing so supports Maine's solid waste management hierarchy.

A somewhat forgotten law passed in 1989 is Maine's Solid Waste Management

Law, or "An Act to Promote Reduction, Recycling, and Integrated Management of Solid Waste and Sound Environmental Legislation," that established an ambitious goal of diverting 50% of Maine waste away from landfills or waste-to-energy plants where it's incinerated, to recycling or composting it instead. And this is where it gets complicated.

Instead of reducing per-capita waste disposal by 50% as the decades-old law intended, Maine's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) reported in 2019 that we've actually increased the amount of waste each of us produces annually by nearly 10%. According to a Maine Public report from February of 2021, the average Mainer disposed of more than 0.6 tons of waste in 2019, and as the pandemic pushed demand for masks, test kits, cleaning products and other goods delivered in cardboard boxes, that number has almost certainly gone up. On the flip side, Maine's recycling rate has decreased. While we're slightly ahead of a national recycling rate estimated at 32%, the 36.46% average reported by DEP is a long way from the state's much earlier goal of 50%. Factor co-mingling contamination into those averages, and the true rate of recycling is almost certainly less.

There are a number of reasons contributing to the lag. Not all that long ago, the U.S. exported and sold millions of tons of plastic waste to China, where it was recycled into new products that they then sold back to us, but as the amount of valuable recycling material they were getting from us went down and the amount of contaminated



waste went up, they stopped buying it. Then in January of 2021, the United Nations adopted new rules that ban the export of contaminated waste to developing nations. Lack of a market and rising costs in general have driven the cost of recycling up, forcing towns and cities to reevaluate whether they can even offer recycling to their residents. Add to all that the fact that we're simply generating more waste per capita and you can see where the scale tips. According to the earlier cited Maine Public report, "The volume of rubbish annually going to Maine landfills and waste-to-energy plants has mostly been growing for at least six years."

Landfills are considered the most wasteful means of trash disposal under Maine's environmental laws, and waste-to-energy plants don't rate much higher, which is why they finish last and next-to-last in the waste management hierarchy. Recycling, when done right, is a better and more valuable way to preserve resources. Which brings me to another reason we're not reaching our recycling goal—us.

In a 16-minute NPR documentary that everyone should watch titled "Is Recycling Worth It Anymore? The Truth is Complicated," a public works employee explains "wishcycling," which is when people think everything, including the kitchen sink, can be recycled. It can't.

"They just think that the recycling cart is a portal to another universe, and it's not."

Another recycling specialist in the documentary offers the following insight, "The one thing about the public is when they are done with the material, they're done with it. They're not connecting the dots that there's a journey that that item is going to take and it's going to become someone else's responsibility."

The reason we've shirked our responsibility is also complicated. At the dawn of the plastic age, there were a lot of manufacturers who realized there was a huge profit margin in marketing single- or limited-use products to consumers and almost overnight the landscape was awash with litter. When the federal government demanded manufacturers address this growing problem, they came up with a rather ingenious plan to avoid restrictions on their production. Several companies, Coca Cola among them, got together to form an organization called Keep America Beautiful, whose first order of business was a media campaign against littering. While it was mostly successful in getting us to stop littering, it did nothing



to solve the overarching problem of excess production. Then came the '70s and the first Earth Day. Environmental activists weren't buying a hokey marketing campaign begging them, "please, please don't be a litterbug." They knew the real problem wasn't litter—it was too much waste—and they began exerting pressure on manufacturers to take responsibility for it. In response, Keep America Beautiful went from hokey to hard-hitting. Who among us over the age of 50 doesn't remember the commercial with a tearful Indigenous man being pelted by trash thrown from a passing car?

It was also about this time that Keep America Beautiful switched its messaging away from littering to recycling. Recycling offered a way to assuage consumer guilt and keep the profit margins ticking for manufacturers. Giving consumers a feel-good way to dispose of the increasing volume of stuff they were purchasing took the focus off them. I'll leave it to someone in the recycling industry to better encapsulate it.

"Recycling, it's one of those things where not only does the public kind of depend on it emotionally to relinquish their guilt about buying things, but it has been kept alive by manufacturers, and there is long history of this."

Make no mistake, recycling is an essential means to combat the overburdening of the Earth, but what it doesn't do is discourage consumption. Crazy as it sounds, recycling may have actually added to disposability by virtue of easing consumer guilt. We need to have a come-to-Jesus conversation around the consequence of our consumption. As another person in the NPR documentary facetiously noted, "Put it in the blue bin and your job as a citizen is done." But we all know it's not.

It's up to all of us to make better choices as consumers. Switching from liquid laundry detergent that comes in a rigid-plastic

container to Human Nature powdered laundry detergent that's made right here in Maine and packaged in a brown paper bag is just one way. Registering with [DMA-choice.org](http://DMA-choice.org) and [catalog-choice.org](http://catalog-choice.org) to opt out of junk mail is another. Challenging yourself to avoid single-use plastic purchases (and it is a challenge) is yet another. We can't solve problems on the backend that were created upstream. If enough of us hold manufacturers accountable through our buying decisions, it will send them a message they can't ignore.

Composting is another way we can cut down on waste. It's estimated that as much as 25% of waste in every trash bag is organic. Turning it into soil is a win-win proposition. If you can't compost in your own backyard, find out if there's a drop-off location near you. More and more transfer and recycling stations are accepting organic waste for composting.

But we cannot give up on recycling. Reduce. Reuse. Recycle. It may be the third R in the chasing arrows logo, but it may also be our best hope when it comes to dealing with our waste dilemma. We just need to do it better.

Cronauer shares an apt analogy: "Think of our waste stream as a bath tub filling up with water. When it overflows, do we want to reach for a mop or turn off the tap? The first thing we need to do is turn the water down or off. We're still going to need to clean up the overflow, so that mop is part of the solution, but our first step should be to turn off the tap."

Education is key, and even if your town isn't one of the municipalities served by ecomaine, I would encourage you to visit their website at [ecomaine.org](http://ecomaine.org) to learn more about how to recycle responsibly.

In the meantime, because I will always be my father's daughter, I strongly recommend focusing your efforts on the first R. 🌱