

RECYCLE OR DIE

"As a society we simply 'externalize' the hidden costs of economic activity, hoping (in vain) that they will not come back to haunt us. But they do."

Recycle or die" is the slogan that appears on a button produced by the Recycling Council of Ontario (RCO) and distributed last year by the student group "York U Can Recycle" (YUCR).

Considering recent warnings about the changing global environment, including the global warming trend known as the greenhouse effect, the depletion of the ozone layer, and the extinction of two species every hour, this bold statement does not seem as absurd as one might think.

Recycling has become somewhat of a mania in the past two years, at least in this part of Ontario. The reasons for this are many and varied. They include an increasing public concern for the fate of the natural environment, a recognition of the need to waste less, a growing interest by individuals in being able to "do something" about ecological problems, and the increasing media attention being given to environmental issues, in particular Metro Toronto's "trash flow crisis" as Colin Vaughan put it in a 1987 *Toronto* magazine article.

York's administration has finally decided to officially wade into this growing phenomenon. After two years of concerted lobbying efforts by YUCR, the University has announced the establishment of an advisory committee which will assist in the formulation of a waste recycling policy for York. Kursh Irani, director of operations for the university's department of physical plant, is coordinating the committee. The plan is to submit the committee's policy to the university administration for approval and eventual implementation.

Response to the announcement has been positive. In just two weeks, over 30 people, students and non-students, have submitted their names in the hope of being on the committee. Irani expects that it will consist of about a dozen people, and thinks that he is going to have difficulty seeing that "all groups and constituencies on campus are represented."

His main concern is that the members of the group be able to work well together so that all interested parties will support the final programs. He hopes the committee will be in place by September, but is unsure as to any specific time frame for approval of the policy and implementation of the programs. He says that consolidation of the existing programs would be the first priority, and that they would then see about expansion. Irani says that any expansion would likely include fine paper recycling in university offices.

For Juanita Berkhout, this year's coordinator of YUCR, the university's decision has not come soon enough. Until now, recycling at York has almost all been courtesy of a few dedicated student volunteers. Berkhout says she has found it frustrating dealing with the university bureaucracy, but is optimistic that things will now move along faster.

The Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES) has been recycling fine paper for several years. In 1986, Kim Silkauskas, a graduate student at FES, organized some volunteers and initiated some additional, yet modest, programs. At first these included the recycling of glass and tin in the Lumbers building, and the occasional pick up of newspapers from the graduate student residences.

By 1988, the volunteer group had grown to 15 members, and had given themselves the name "York U Can Recycle" (YUCR). They continued to expand their existing programs and soon were able to convince the university to provide several large bins for newspaper recycling at 22 Moon Road, and at 4 and 6 Assiniboine Road. The newspapers were initially picked up by an out-

side contractor, but are now hauled by the university. Irani estimates that 150 tonnes of materials per year are recycled by people at York.

After some further lobbying by the students, and with the support of the university, the City of North York provided large bins for glass and tin recycling which are now located between 4 and 6 Assiniboine. The City collects the contents of these on a regular basis. The group has also been able to get cardboard recycling at a number of loading docks around campus.

Judging by the volume of recyclables being generated, the success of these programs is indisputable. Members of the university community seem more than willing to recycle when the facilities for doing so are made available to them. The problem is that with large volumes of material, it becomes too much work for the volunteers to handle properly. Realizing this, YUCR decided that its priority in 1988 should be to

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convince the university of the merits of the programs and accept the responsibility for operating them.

Irani admits that the university has been slow to act on recycling, but does not make excuses. He said that the enthusiasm of the people who are already recycling on campus, and the large number of queries about establishing more recycling programs were the main reasons for creating the committee.

There is no doubt, however, that as he said, "economics has also had a lot to do with it." The tipping fees — what the University has to pay to dump its garbage — have gone up from \$18 per tonne to \$100 per tonne in the last two years. Irani estimates that at York, we generate 2000 tonnes of garbage a year. Given the increased cost of disposing of garbage and the growing volume of York's waste, it is not surprising that recycling is now an increasingly appealing alternative.

Tired of waiting for the university to catch up with the rest of Metro, a number of other people have started volunteer-run recycling programs at York. These include sporadic paper recycling at Osgoode Hall, and recycling of computer paper at Steacie. In addition to this, a new program to recycle newspapers, tin, and glass has been established at Bethune College.

In 1988, Julie Parna Stief, a former student and now the Coordinator of Liaison at Glendon College, was able to start a fine paper recycling program there. Parna Stief said that without the full support of Director Ed Parker and the Physical Plant staff there, the program would not have been successful. With nine bins located throughout the campus, members of the Glendon community recycled 5810 pounds of paper in the first year.

In addition to this, students at Glendon have formed the Glendon Recycling Committee and were recycling glass, tin and newspapers in the residences last year. Following YUCR's example, the committee intends to push for institutionalized campus-wide recycling at both the Glendon and York campuses.

York, however, still has a lot of catching up to do, and given our size, the potential to have a significant impact on the local waste stream is great. Guelph, in the meantime, has been the clear leader among university recycling programs. Its first venture into recycling was initiated by the Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG) in 1985, and included the recycling of tin, glass and

newspapers from the residences. It was largely a student volunteer operation, with some assistance from the grounds department.

According to an article in the recent issue of the RCO's *Ontario Recycling Update*, Guelph launched an expanded recycling program in March of this year, which will extend fine paper recycling to all academic and administrative offices in a total of 120 buildings.

Guelph is also now recycling corrugated cardboard, and since 1983 has been composting the animal manure from the veterinary school for use around the campus grounds. In just three months of the program, the university has reduced the amount of garbage sent to the landfill by 260 tonnes. Guelph's success has been attributed to the cooperation and support of the University administration, the students, the City and such campus groups as OPIRG.

Good news like this can be impoverished

Beyond this, and perhaps even more important, are the costs born by the animals and plants whose habitats are destroyed by the cutting down of forests and the creation of dumps. These are almost never considered. As a society, we simply "externalize" the hidden costs of economic activity, hoping (in vain) that they will not come back to haunt us. But, they do.

Despite the apparent value in recycling, not everybody thinks it is a panacea. "Recycling is a cop-out," says Steve Jones.

Jones is critical of the emphasis on recycling because he feels that not only is it inefficient, but that it also avoids the more real and important issue of reducing our waste to begin with. It is, he feels, far more important, but not as easy, to promote waste reduction rather than recycling. As he says, "No matter how much you recycle, reduction will always be a more effective way of reducing waste."

It is, among other things, through using

by the fact that recycling programs are often subject to problems that can seriously reduce their effectiveness. Perhaps the most important reason for this is the frequent lack of information provided to people about what can and cannot be recycled.

In order to make processing worthwhile and to produce good quality products, recyclable inputs must be free from "contamination." What this means is that, in the case of glass recycling, the bins of glass that are collected must be free of such things as plastic bags, metal lids, ceramics and other non-glass materials. Not surprisingly then, YUCR focused much of its energy on public education last year, distributing 2,000 information sheets to the residences.

Contamination can be so bad, according to FES student Steve Jones, that whole truckloads of would-be recyclables are simply dumped into landfills because of the prohibitive effort and expense of trying to sort them out. Having been involved in recycling programs at both Guelph University and York, as well as serving on the North York Recycling Sub-Committee, and having worked on the planning of the North York blue box and apartment recycling programs, Jones has considerable knowledge of the subject. In his mind, the importance of educational and informational materials, both before and during recycling programs, cannot be stressed enough.

As Jones sees it, one of the major reasons why institutions such as York are reluctant to move forward with full scale recycling programs is the tendency to consider programs only in narrow economic terms. If they do not appear to be economically "efficient," then they are unlikely to go ahead. Berkhout echoes this sentiment, and is concerned that the university consider the many long-term benefits of reducing and recycling waste, and not simply the short term costs. "People don't see what they save; they only see what they are going to make," she says. Indeed, there are also more important values than economics to consider, in particular, that of a clean and healthy environment.

Jones argues that the wastage that comes from the almost free disposal of garbage has hidden "costs" that are ultimately born by society. These can include the degradation of the natural environment from excessive use of trees and minerals, as well as from landfills and incinerator pollution. They can also include health-related problems due to contamination of drinking water, air, and soil.

fewer throw-away convenience products like foam cups and cans of pop, buying fewer newspapers, and reducing the amount of needless packaging, that society can best reduce its waste and the attendant stresses on the natural environment. Recycling helps, but it is not enough.

At Guelph for example, OPIRG and the University Food Services Division are promoting the use of a reusable coffee mug in order to reduce — from 10,000 per day — the number of non-biodegradable foam cups used on campus. It is difficult to estimate the corresponding figure for York since Food Services contracts the work out to a number of different catering companies. This fact has also made it difficult for YUCR to get foam cups and plates replaced, says Berkhout.

Irani is in favour of waste reduction, but does not have any specific plans. He hopes that the Advisory Committee will make recommendations for a "two-pronged attack" to reduce and recycle.

Reduction may be an even more appealing route to take since one of the other problems with recycling programs right now is the distinct lack of facilities in Canada that actually process the materials into new products. As Steve Jones sees it, we are now in the gap between when the public shows its willingness to recycle, thereby demonstrating the supply of recyclable materials, and when the companies make the investment in equipment and re-tooling to actually do the recycling.

According to a recent *Globe and Mail* article (June 3, 1989), there is an "urban forest" of old newspapers piled in a Toronto warehouse — the result of the public's enthusiastic response to the blue box programs — waiting for plants to be built or redesigned in order to process the newspapers into new products. Complicating this lack of facilities is the fact that the prices for used newspapers and other recyclables are currently quite low.

And, as Jones points out, recycling is currently such that we are often simply postponing the inevitable. Unless materials are recycled directly back into the same sort of product — which can again be recycled — the material will eventually end up in the landfills and incinerators anyway. Furthermore, to properly "close the circle", we as users of products need to demand not only that they be recyclable, but also that they be made from recycled materials. Otherwise, the destruction of the natural environment will go on unabated.