

## A Trashy Problem

In 2016, the United States sent 16 million tons of recyclable materials to China. For years, China had been taking almost half of the world's reusable trash. The system was working because China's manufacturing businesses needed these materials to make their products. It seemed like a win-win situation. Until it wasn't.

It turned out that these recyclable materials were causing problems. Almost thirty percent of the plastic, paper, and metal sent to China was contaminated by non-recyclable material. A lot of it was low quality plastic. The trash was never recycled and ended up polluting China's land and water. More than a million tons of plastic were dumped into China's ocean each year. Besides contaminating the water, these materials caused crops to die and people to become sick from the toxic fumes released when the trash was burnt.

In response to these problems, China banned the import of much of the United State's recycling in 2018. Now the U.S. recycling system was broken. With nowhere to send the materials, recycling facilities had to pay more to process the items. When they couldn't pay, the trash ended up in landfills. Because the system depended on China for so long, a national method of

recycling was never developed. Cities and towns were left to figure it out on their own.

How did they solve the problem? It's still a work in progress. One solution is to increase the quality of materials that are used in producing new goods so that when they are eventually thrown away they will be more attractive to foreign markets. Higher quality plastics and paper are still in demand worldwide.

Another solution is to improve technology for sorting materials so that things that can be recycled don't get contaminated by things that cannot. This solution involves providing more education to people about what can be recycled. It might also involve rewarding people when they recycle properly and charging them fines when they don't.

A third solution is to use more recycled materials in new products. Then these products need to be sold widely, and people need to want to buy them. One way to do this is to create laws that require businesses to buy products that contain a certain percentage of recycled material.

Finally, it is necessary to look beyond recycling. Reducing the amount of materials people buy and reusing items are important strategies to manage trash. Experts say that China's recycling restrictions may actually be a blessing in disguise for U.S. waste management. By creating a challenge, the



restrictions have inspired creative problem solving that will ultimately improve the system.



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NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Which of the following was NOT mentioned as a negative effect of the materials sent to China?
  - a. The water was contaminated
  - b. People became sick from toxic fumes
  - c. Animals lost their habitats
  - d. Crops died
  
2. What happened when China banned the U.S. from sending a lot of its recyclable materials?
  - a. The U.S. sent them anyway
  - b. The items ended up in landfills
  - c. China and the U.S. fought with each other
  - d. The items were easily recycled in the U.S. instead
  
3. Which materials are still in demand worldwide?
  - a. Metals
  - b. Cheap plastics
  - c. Wood
  - d. High quality plastics and paper
  
4. What is one way to improve the sorting of recycled materials?
  - a. Educate people about what can be recycled and what cannot
  - b. Reuse items
  - c. Create laws about the products that businesses buy
  - d. Increase the quality of materials used to make things

Instructions for teachers:

These questions can be used to assess understanding of the reading passage.

The item in bold is the correct answer for each question.

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