

The packaging nightmare

Packaging represents a growing share of the average household's waste, particularly if you consider not only its weight but also its volume. There are many reasons for this increase: smaller households, increasing use of convenience food (ready-made meals) at home and on the move, and higher food hygiene standards. All these factors encourage the use of disposable packaging and individual portions. But above all packaging is a key component in international trade. Fifty years ago most of what we consumed was produced nearby. Today even basic goods such as water travel halfway round the world to reach us (see following page). Last but not least, packaging is a major marketing tool, a vector for brand names and consumer values.

The manufacture of packaging itself generates waste and by definition it has a particularly short lifespan. It turns into waste as soon as its contents reaches its destination. This is certainly a blessing for the packaging sector – and the related plastics, paper and printing industries – but it presents a serious challenge for waste management (see also pages 24–25 and 26–27).

Packaging of all kinds

Once a product is manufactured and ready to be sold, it must be distributed. To protect it from dirt and shocks, to make it easier to store, but also to make it look appealing, a whole science has developed to design the most suitable wrappings. The variety of products demands a huge diversity of packaging and a wide range of materials: cardboard boxes, glass jars, plastic bags, plastic film, aluminium wrappers and expanded polystyrene, to name just a few.

Part of it is reused or recycled with varying efficiency depending on the degradability of the components and the efficiency of the recycling chain (collection and processing).



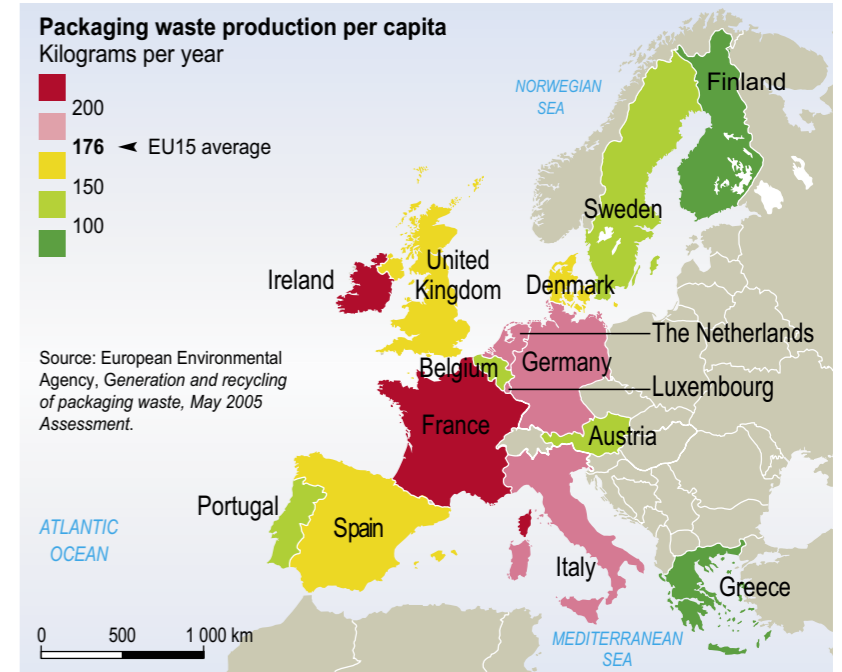
At your level:

- Consume** local produce (especially fresh food);
- Drink** tap water and advocate protecting its quality;
- Take** your own reusable bag when you go shopping;
- Choose** containers that are easy to reuse and recycle;
- Buy** in bulk when possible;
- Boycott** over-packaged products and individual portions.

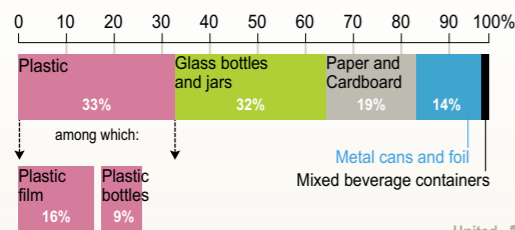


ON THE WEB

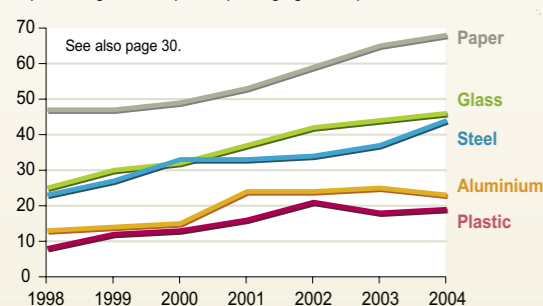
WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme):
www.wrap.org.uk
Packaging Recovery Organisation Europe:
www.pro-e.org
Evaluation of European packaging waste management systems:
reports.eea.europa.eu/eea_report_2005_3/en/FINAL-3_05-Packaging_waste_WEB.pdf



Packaging waste composition in the UK
 in percentage of total packaging waste



Recycling rates of different packaging material
 in percentage of the specific packaging waste produced



Sources: UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, *e-Digest of Environmental Statistics*, 2006; Julian Parfitt, WRAP as cited in *Cool Waste Management*, Greenpeace, 2003.

Plastic packaging

According to Residua, a UK company working on solid waste issues, about 50 per cent of European goods are wrapped in plastic (17 per cent by weight). There are many types of plastic packaging: plastic bottles are often made of polyethylene terephthalate (PET), yoghurt pots are mostly polypropylene (PP), wrapping film, bin liners and flexible containers are usually low-density polyethylene (LDPE) and so on. This diversity partly explains why recycling rates for plastics are low: each type of plastic needs its own recycling process.

Most plastics are derived from oil or gas, the extraction and processing of which requires large amounts of chemicals and, of course, generates waste (including hazardous waste).

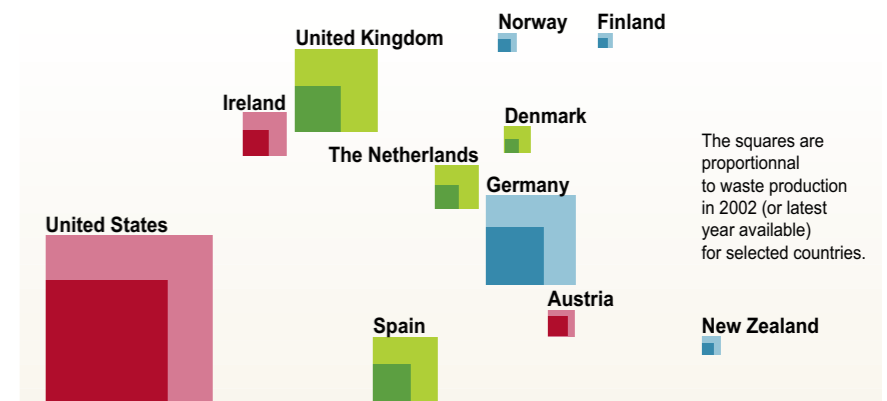
Facts

- One plastic bag** takes 1 second to manufacture, is 20 minutes in use, and takes 100-400 years to degrade naturally.
- 500 thousand million bags** a year distributed worldwide, or 16 000 a second
- 60 000 tons of plastic** are used in France alone to produce disposable plastic bags.

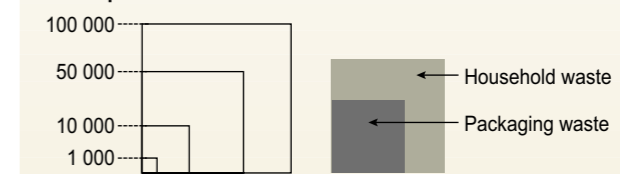
Invading the landscape

Plastic bags are given away in huge quantities by grocery stores and supermarkets all over the world. The bags are not degradable and end up on dumps or in the wild, spotting landscapes with flickering coloured dots. The bags certainly come at a cost, but it is well hidden in the price of our purchases and, as consumers, we tend to forget we could avoid this surcharge (and the extra waste) by bringing our own bag.

Some countries are launching drives to ban plastic bags or replace them with more sustainable containers (raising some interesting scientific debates on less resource-intensive options). But there is growing concern in developing countries especially in Africa. The increased use of plastic bags is particularly noticeable in the new economies of the former Soviet Union, where only a few years ago a plastic bag was treasured as an important belonging and washed endlessly for careful reuse.



Waste production in thousand tonnes



Share of packaging waste in total household waste:

- Higher than 50%
- Between 33 and 50%
- Lower than 33%

Sources: OECD Environmental Data 2004.