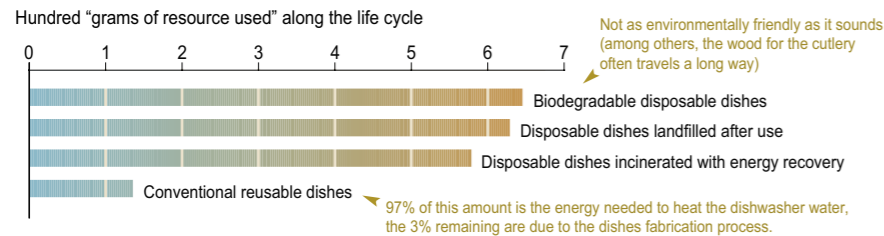


Recycling – the right choice?

Reusing and recycling are natural survival strategies for many people in the developing world. In rich countries we abandoned the habit and are now re-learning how to reuse and recycle. Public rubbish collection and a well established recycling industry do a big part of the job for us. We appease our guilty conscience by recycling the goods we buy in increasing amounts. But recyclers do not process everything locally, sending some devices abroad for reuse by those who cannot buy new goods. There they pile up. But this does not mean we should stop recycling waste. We just have to keep sight of what it involves.

Recycling demands lengthy transport, which also affects the environment. In France waste transport accounts for 15 per cent of all goods transport. It is estimated that half the cost of recycling a tonne of waste is transport-related. It has an impact on energy consumption too. Much glass is recycled but its recovery, involving transport and melting, consumes lots of energy. Why not reuse the same bottles several times? So if we really want to reduce damage, the only solution is to cut waste output. The simplest way to do that is to reduce consumption. Hence the three “Rs” slogan: reduce – reuse – recycle. We might add, rethink!

Everyday alternatives: biodegradable, disposable or conventional tableware?



The calculations consider all resources necessary to support the life cycle of a single table setting (plate, glass, knife, fork, spoon and coffee cup).
Source: Friedrich Schmidt-Bleek et al., *Der ökologische rucksack, Wirtschaft für eine Zukunft mit Zukunft*, Hirzel Editions, Stuttgart, 2004.

The priority is to decrease the amount of waste we generate. Only then should we be proud of the high rates for recycling some countries report (see examples for glass and paper). Glass recycling scores best, perhaps because an old habit has never been lost. Many countries still have a deposit on glass bottles (Scandinavia) or have even expanded it (Germany).

The downside of the mobile phone hype

On average Americans change their mobile every two years. In Europe they only keep them 18 months. Yet the device itself is designed to last at least seven years. In the US, in 2005, an estimated 130 million cell phones were trashed, resulting in 65 000 tonnes of waste. Only two per cent of mobiles are recycled in Europe. Millions of others are lying around unused in cupboards and drawers (19 million in France alone). And their number will go on rising until efficient collection and recycling systems are set up.

Some operators recover old mobiles and send them to eastern Europe and emerging countries where they are reconditioned and sold. This enables operators to build up a customer base in countries where wireless networks are developing. The collection of these used phones at the end of their life remain a challenge.

A French NGO has adopted a different approach. With the help of a welfare organisation it is refurbishing old phones and giving them to poor people in France, who feel excluded not having a mobile.

As for recycling itself, the cable on the charger, once crushed and sorted, produces copper and plastic. LCD screens are processed at special facilities, as are batteries which generally contain lithium. The shell is melted to make more plastic. Specialist recyclers can powder the integrated circuits and recover all the tiny quantities of rare, precious metals (gold, silver, copper, platinum, palladium, rhodium, etc.). With the price of raw materials rising steeply even such costly methods are becoming financially viable.

The waste caused by constant replacement of mobiles is certainly a problem. Yet we could halve that amount by simply keeping our phones twice or three times as long.

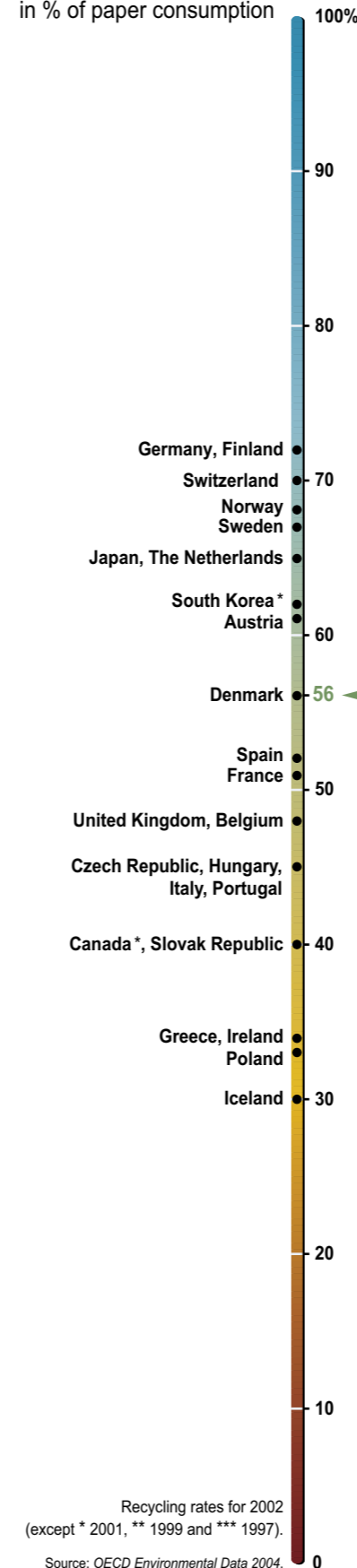


ON THE WEB

Local Paper for London:
www.greenchoices.org/features/00001.html
Mobile phone:
www.ticethic.com
Plastics:
www.residua.com

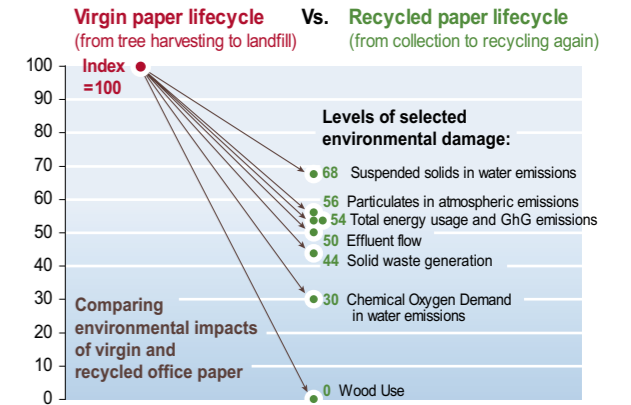
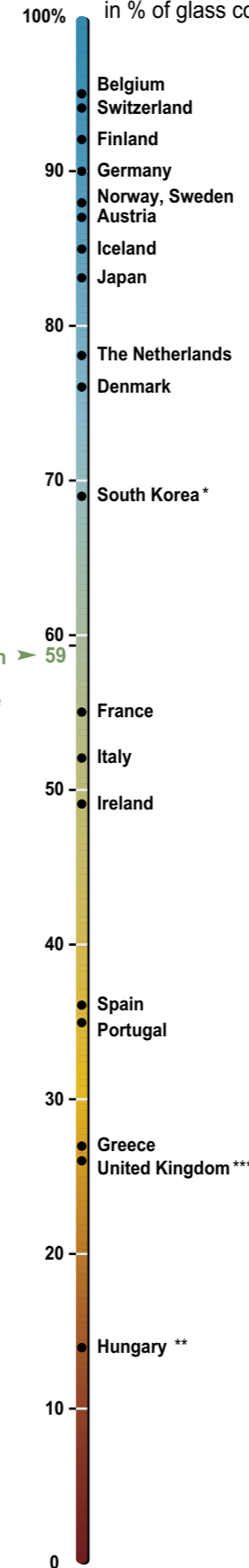
Recycled paper

in % of paper consumption



Recycled glass

in % of glass consumption



Source: Paper Task Force Recommendations for Purchasing and Using Environmentally Preferable Paper, Environmental Defense Fund, 1995 (figures revised in 2002).

Other ways of recycling paper

In 1999, the British consultant BioRegional (see page 28) thought up an innovative way of dealing with waste paper. Surely offices could sort their own paper and, after local reprocessing, reuse it? Local Paper for London now recycles more than 2 000 tonnes of paper a year, cutting the paper bill by 20 per cent for 400 organisations (schools, government bodies, firms, etc.) taking part in the scheme.

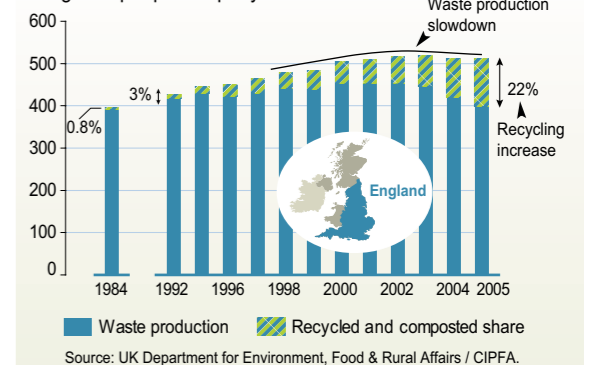
Ugandans drive the Japanese way

As in other African countries there is a busy trade in second-hand cars from developed countries in Uganda. In 2002 it was estimated that the country imported 1 000 used cars, at least five years old, every month from Japan. More than three-quarters of them stayed in the capital Kampala.

Such imports have many environmental impacts, in particular on the atmosphere. Very few garages have the electronic gear to tune such cars properly. The ones that do are very expensive, the preserve of the upper classes and expatriate westerners.

Household waste and recycling in England

Kilograms per person per year



Source: UK Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs / CIPFA.

Recycling rates for 2002 (except * 2001, ** 1999 and *** 1997).
Source: OECD Environmental Data 2004.