

PACKAGING

Packaging can be defined as any material used to contain, protect and present goods, and has evolved into playing an important role in our modern lifestyles. While packaging has environmental advantages such as extending the shelf life of products, there are many adverse environmental impacts like unnecessary use of natural resources, particularly for excessive presentation (think of chocolate boxes) and the creation of waste in our landfills.

Most packaging has a short life span, with its durability and visibility in landfill confirming its wastefulness. Packaging currently accounts for approximately 32% by weight and 50% by volume of the domestic waste stream with plastic packaging being the largest contributor (WHEN). While commercial and environmental pressures demand packaging reductions, unfortunately individually packaged 'convenience' foods are increasing. This increases the amount of packaging per food unit, creating further waste.

The production of raw materials for packaging often involves the generation of large quantities of solid wastes,

with some of these wastes being toxic. Plastic production in particular generates a lot of solid wastes with high off-cuts and spoilage rates. Production emissions create air and water pollution while most packaging materials require large amounts of energy, creating greenhouse gases.

There may be many downsides to packaging waste, however, there have been some improvements - the recycling of packaging continues to spread, there is now greater recognition of packaging as a reusable resource and the 'lightweighting' of packaging reduces the consumption of raw materials and means less solid waste needs to be disposed of. For example, Australian corrugated cardboard is now amongst the lightest available in the world. We are also the first country in the world to convert to retained tab can ends for beer and soft drink cans.

References:

WHEN, online at

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/%7Ewhen/package.htm>

WHAT CAN I DO?

- Consumers, commercial bodies and governments must work together to reduce the impact of packaging on the natural environment. Consumers need to show more interest in the environmental responsibility of products and companies they buy from. Let them know what you think. Check the packaging of the goods that you buy. Is it made from recycled materials? Can it be recycled in your local area? Is there an alternative product that can be recycled? Beat the advertisers and don't be persuaded by the 'pretty' packaging. If it's going to create waste, don't buy it.
- Governments across the world have targeted packaging for environmental legislation. In Australia, an example of this is the National Packaging Covenant (see 'More Information'). Other examples include container deposits, levies on packaging, banning specific packaging types and mandatory recycling. Do some research and find out how your favourite companies fair.

MORE INFORMATION

- www.packcoun.com.au/ The Packaging Council of Australia Inc, includes many links
- www.environment.gov.au/settlements/waste/ - Here you will find information on the national packaging covenant.
- www.sustainablepack.org - The Australian Sustainable Packaging Alliance.
- www.mfe.govt.nz/issues/sustainable-industry/initiatives/packaging/ - Packaging waste in New Zealand