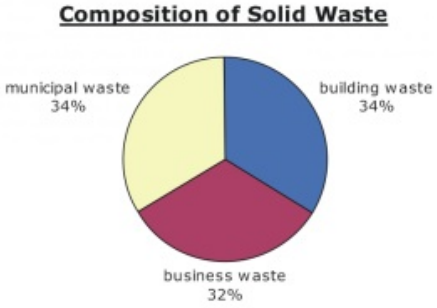
SOLID WASTE

Solid waste encompasses the majority of waste created and is defined by three distinct categories of waste: municipal waste (divided into domestic waste and council waste), building waste and business waste. While wealthy industrial countries such as Australia represent about 25% of the world's population, they use over 80% of the natural resources consumed and produce 75% of the world's total solid waste (DEC). After the U.S., Australia has the second highest domestic waste production per capita in the world, this being a reflection of our standard of living as well as our consumption attitudes and practices.

Substantial natural resources are lost through waste. While some resources are lost in the final waste material, others are consumed during product manufacture and its transport. The rate of loss can be very high, especially for products that are designed for single use only or are relatively short-lived. Impacts of excessive natural resource consumption include ocean, surface and ground water pollution, air pollution, production of greenhouse gases and the land and soil contamination from landfill sites. After closing, landfills filled with solid waste need to be monitored and rehabilitated as much as possible. These potential environmental impacts make it difficult to find locations for new landfill sites, particularly in developed areas where the majority of solid waste is created, as people do not want to live near a landfill site, and remote locations increase transport costs and energy use.



Luckily, an increasing number of industries are using recycled materials in the manufacture of some products, for example using tyre 'crumb' to produce or retread bitumen roads or recycling glass bottles to reproduce more glass bottles (the Department of Environment and Heritage at http://www.deh.gov.au/industry/ provides great information on sustainable industries). However, recycling and reuse activities also create waste of natural resources through the production of new products. Therefore, avoidance where possible is the best possible option for reducing our solid waste production.

REFERENCE: Department of Environment and Conservation, online at
http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au

WHAT CAN I DO?

- Avoid solid waste generation by refusing unnecessary products and packaging: buy only what you need! Choose products with the least packaging or with recyclable packaging and buy in bulk where appropriate (for example, long shelf life products like rice and detergents-check your local health food shop or a range of companies online). Say no to plastic bags and instead take reusable cloth bags when shopping. Write to or email manufacturers who over package their products encouraging them to stop. Do not buy their products until they change their unsustainable practices!

- Reduce the use of toxic and hazardous products by using environmentally friendly substitutes for cleaning (view the Household Hazardous Waste page for further info) using rechargeable batteries and recycling oil (ask at you local garage about options in your area. Dispose of hazardous chemicals through special facilities at your nearest landfill or ask about annual collections at your local council.

- Reuse scrap paper and envelopes and reuse containers or lunchboxes instead of non-reusable items like plastic wrap for your lunches. Buy products that are designed to be used more (eg. ceramic cups or glasses instead of plastic cups or cloth napkins rather than paper ones). Borrow, rent or share items with friends and neighbours.

- Each week, one recycling household can save over 3 kg of greenhouse gases - enough electricity to run a 40 watt light bulb for 72 hours (EcoRecycle Victoria)! Compost yard waste and vegetable scraps, and set up a system so that items like paper, plastic, cans and glass can be recycled. Buy products that are recyclable or made from a recycled material and sell or donate items such as clothing, household goods, furniture, left over paint for garage sales or to second hand shops, community groups or schools instead of throwing them out.

References: Ecorecycle Victoria, online at http://www.ecorecycle.vic.gov.au

MORE INFORMATION

- http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/subjects/waste/ - a U.K. site including different types of solid waste and major topics concerning it.
- http://www-tnswep.ra.utk.edu - a solid waste education project from the U.S.
- http://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/soe/95/19_1.htm - A NSW report on solid waste management.