

Paper or Plastic  
Written by Daniel Imhoff  
Foreword by Randy Hayes  
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The Right Stuff: Reenvisioning Waste and Our Future  
By Randy Hayes

I have spent much of my life fighting to make the world's last undeveloped natural places safe for the indigenous peoples and native species that inhabit them. My journey has taken me to the mighty Amazon and deep into the darkest reaches of Borneo's rain forests. I can say from personal experience that it is just plain wrong for those cathedral forests to fall for throwaway transport pallets, packaging fiber, or oil feedstock to make plastic wrappers. Back at home, at the top of the consumption chain, it tortures my soul to see the incessant flow of packaging going into dead-end landfill: toxic cemeteries. Each piece thrown away pulls at the threads of the complex fabric of the natural world, and contributes to the ultimate unraveling of our common future.

Because we are faced with pressing problems such as global climate destabilization, total destruction of irreplaceable ecosystems, and widespread species extinction, you might think issues such as industrial and household packaging are low on the list of environmental priorities. But as this book correctly asserts, packaging is part and parcel of lifestyles that have become almost completely disconnected from earth's natural cycles and capacity to process our industrial wastes. The time has come to address what has become an absurdly over-packaged world.

By our very nature, we are traders. We require food, clothing, shelter, culture, and comforts, and packages help deliver them. To that end, we must establish systems that honorably and rationally support trade but at the same time protect natural systems and habitats from which all things are derived. It is equally important that we address manageable basic issues as well as the looming, daunting challenges. Doing so can inspire us to realize an ecologically sustainable society in our lifetime.

As an Environmental Commissioner for the city of San Francisco I authored a resolution to achieve 75 percent waste diversion by 2010 and zero waste by 2020. This year, San Francisco will surpass 62 percent diversion of its waste flow—well on its way to meeting the first target and ultimately the second: no waste. This is the stuff, the right stuff, of creating a more sustainable world. Some may argue that energy spent recovering every last scrap of packaging is counterproductive and that without complex systems and infrastructure in place, it is far more efficient just to bury our cast-offs in the world's "wastelands." I'm not for wastelands and I don't imagine you are either.

Here is a definition of sustainability that might surprise you: Diverse and rewarding lifestyles that many would want to emulate, and if they all did, the planet's natural systems and wildlife populations would flourish, increasingly, each generation. This is a vision of not only a better world but also one with a conscious, self-healing capacity. However, if we are to save our ancient rain forests and build the better world that we know is possible, we need your help now. We all have a part to play.

Envision a zero-waste society, one in which consumer goods and the packaging that wraps them are no longer repositories of spent energy and materials. Those sacred materials feed new jobs, new forms of economic development, and new durable goods. Now imagine a society powered by 100 percent renewable energy. Imagine it in less than 25 years as is the policy and plan for both San Francisco and Oakland, California. Next, quadruple the carrying capacity of mass transit. Then, transform chemical-laden, erosion-prone agribusiness into organic, soil-building systems that provide a steady supply of healthy food that is better for both people and the planet. This is sustainability in action. This is the ecologically evolved society where you, your family, and future generations deserve to live.

Transforming our packaging systems is a necessary part of that vision, not just through simple materials substitution or the incremental changes of eco-efficiency, but through the deeper systems approach that you will learn about in this book. Remember, waste is a construct that humanity invented at a time when industry lacked a deep understanding of ecological processes. There is no waste in nature.

Paper or Plastic is the final installment in Watershed Media's Wood Reduction Trilogy, which includes *The Guide to Tree-Free, Recycled, and Certified Papers* (1999) and *Building with Vision* (2001). These books tackle the difficult task of addressing the impacts of increasing wood consumption with on-the-ground solutions for our design trades.

For Dan Imhoff, Roberto Carra, and myself, these books have been an outgrowth of our love and respect for the world's ancient forests and the creatures that abound there. As we all know, the highest "use" of an old forest is as an old forest—providing nesting sites for fluorescent-beaked toucans as well as a canopied highway for bands of red howler monkeys to scamper about. And we can't forget the role forests play in providing all life with clean air, clean water, and a stable climate. By reducing wood fiber consumption, moving from throwaway to closed-loop recyclable and reusable distribution systems, we can move toward a future of healthy forests rather than continue the desperate fight to prevent their destruction. In order to help toucans and howler monkeys keep their glorious homes, we can and we must dramatically reduce the amount of virgin wood logged from ancient and intact forests for use in paper, construction, and packaging. This book and its companions are an important step on that essential journey.

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