

Straight to landfill? Why Hong Kong is recycling less of your rubbish

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Lifestyle

Alan Yu life@scmp.com

Even as Hong Kong landfills are rapidly running out of space, the city's recycling levels are decreasing

For years, Christina Jang has been conscientiously sorting the plastic bottles, aluminium cans and recyclable paper from her rubbish and placing them in the appropriate bins for recycling. But last summer, a cleaning lady in her building opened her eyes to what really happened to the materials that were supposed to be recycled.

"While she was collecting from the bin, I happened to take the recycling down and I asked her how I should sort my trash. She said you don't need to do any sorting because it all goes in the trash anyway," Jang says. "I was very angry because I had been sorting my trash, thinking that [we] were recycling everything and now you're telling me it's all a sham."

The property managers for her building couldn't give a satisfactory answer either.

Despite the discouraging response, Jang, a career coach and environmental consultant in her 40s, continues to separate her rubbish.

[**Read more: Street cleaners send waste for recycling to landfills \[1\]**](#)

"I realised that it'll be worse if I don't sort my trash. I believe that consumers' voices do matter because if we don't do

it, then no one will."

There have long been complaints about cleaners mixing trash and recyclable materials, all of which ends up in landfills: in 2013 the SCMP filmed government contract workers doing just that in Causeway Bay and Wan Chai, and residents have regularly reported similar incidents with rubbish disposal.

That is why, since last year, government contractors have been required to use clearly labelled plastic bags for recyclable materials so everyone can keep an eye on them, says Wong Hon-meng, an assistant director at the Environmental Protection Department.

But both the recycling sector and environment officials acknowledge the problem goes beyond cleaners not handling trash properly: it's hard to make money from recycling materials and the costs of sorting and transporting recyclables can far exceed what companies earn from selling the materials.

[*Read more: Hong Kong's first e-waste plant to be built by German recycling firm under multimillion-dollar deal \[2\]*](#)

The city just doesn't make it worthwhile to recycle and this is creating a pressing issue - Hong Kong's propensity for generating more trash is matched by the declining capacity of its landfills.

A 2013 report by the department estimates that all three landfills in the New Territories will be full by 2019. The report also shows that Hong Kong produces more rubbish each day compared to nearby cities at a similar level of development: each person in the Tokyo metropolitan area generates about 0.77kg of trash daily compared 1kg per day for a Taipei resident, while Hongkongers top them all by each producing 1.36kg per day. The department hopes to reduce the amount thrown out by each person to 0.8kg per day by 2022.

But even as policymakers have taken to warning in recent years how Hong Kong landfills are rapidly running out of space, the city is recycling increasingly less of its rubbish: the amount that is processed and reused has declined from 52 per cent in 2010 to 37 per cent in 2013.



Alfred Wong of HK Recycles. Photo: Jonathan Wong

This may improve as the government gears up to introduce rubbish disposal charges for households and businesses, with a series of public briefings in June.

A panel of the government-appointed Council for Sustainable Development last year proposed fees of up to 39 cents per kg under a pay-as-you-throw scheme; based on estimates that one person generates about 1.27kg of waste per day, the bill for a three-person household would come up to HK\$44 each month.

In 2014 the government also committed HK\$1 billion for a new fund to help upgrade technology and infrastructure in the recycling sector and an advisory panel was set up in August to guide its operation.

Because Hong Kong has few of the factories and farms that could utilise waste plastic and compost (from food waste), most of its recycled material is exported, says Wong of the department.

[*Read more: Hong Kong issues dire warning on landfills amid protests by residents \[3\]*](#)

This means local recyclers' earnings are heavily dependent on the global prices of oil, plastic and other commodities. If it's cheaper to buy new plastic, manufacturers will naturally ignore recycled material.

Wong says the new fund will help recycling companies adopt modern technologies that may bring in a more stable source of revenue, for example, by converting waste oil into biodiesel.

Jacky Lau Yiu-shing, chief director of the Hong Kong Recycle Materials and Reproduction Business General Association, believes an economic incentive should boost recycling rates.

"If the trash isn't worth anything, then no one will sort it for you. Most cleaners don't get paid to recycle; property management companies have to placate the Environmental Protection Department so they'll order cleaners to recycle, but the stuff isn't worth much money," he says. "It's a vicious cycle: you can't get any money from recycling, and the people on the front lines don't get paid."

Lau, who runs recycler Lau Choi Kee Papers Co, says a lot of paper and aluminium (mostly drink cans) are recycled because there is a well-established market for those materials; but that's not the case for plastic.

As a result, paper makes up 52 per cent of all recycled matter while plastics comprise just 12 per cent, even though both materials each account for about 19 per cent of waste generated in Hong Kong.

Moreover, Lau says government contractors are often forced to dump contents collected from roadside recycling bins with other trash because they are heavily contaminated with things such as half-eaten meals and cigarette butts.



The thing about roadside bins is, there's no money to be had in recycling ... contractors have to go all over

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"The thing about roadside bins is, there's no money to be had in recycling ... contractors have to go all over Hong Kong [to collect waste] so the logistics is quite expensive and they won't really do the separation for you; all they'll do is collect the trash and send it to another company. We [recyclers] have to pay them, so if the trash is too contaminated, then we won't take it."

Meanwhile, the recycling sector is going through a tough patch because the market for recycled materials isn't very good; it's also tiring and dirty work, Lau says, so very few young people want to enter the industry, with the youngest workers already in their 40s.

Alfred Wong perhaps presents new prospects for recycling. The 27-year-old Wong is general manager of HK Recycles, which he describes as a logistics rather than recycling business.

Hong Kong [to collect waste] so the logistics is quite expensive

Jacky Lau Yiu-shing, chief director of the Hong Kong Recycle Materials and Reproduction Business General Association



Recyclable plastic bottles are collected in clearly labelled bags. Photo: Jonathan Wong

The company, which was set up in 2012 by two socially minded entrepreneurs, Brian Mak and Mike Shum, has been able to recycle almost 90 per cent of the trash collected from some 600 clients, including office buildings and property management companies.

Wong says the key to how it has been able to recycle so much is simple: HK Recycles runs workshops and seminars for clients on how to separate their waste before collecting recyclable materials from them. Fees are charged to cover the cost of moving the recyclable materials to companies that do the processing.

HK Recycles is able to collect clean and well-sorted recyclable materials because their collectors talk to clients and

offer tips on what can and cannot be recycled (drink cartons, for example, are not suitable). And the task is made easier by issuing zippered heavy-duty plastic bags prominently labelled for glass, paper, plastic and metal.

Wong says there has been so much interest in HK Recycles services that they have had to take down the fee listing on its webpage. (Households are typically charged HK\$39 for a weekly collection and offices between HK\$100 and HK\$200. There are also monthly corporate packages that include recycling data and workshops for between HK\$500 and HK\$1,000.) Even so, there are 400 to 500 potential clients on their waiting list.

"The industry complains that people don't know how to sort and how to recycle, but from our experience, that's actually not true," Alfred Wong says.

Details have yet to emerge on the government's new recycling fund but Wong wonders how effective it can be if local recycling contractors prove reluctant to modernise their operations.

Many companies conceded in a Hong Kong Productivity Council report last year that collection is inefficient and expensive because they must pay to pick up the recyclable materials from various districts. Yet none of the recycling companies that Wong spoke to expressed any interest when he outlined the HK Recycles business model and the software used to track and gather data about their operations.

"The fear that I have for this recycling fund is ... if recyclers are not willing to improve their operations, then it's kind of pointless."

Things you can do

Following a successful inaugural Zero Waste Week in June, environmental campaigners have added a Zero Waste corporate challenge to the programmes rolling out under the annual Hong Kong Clean-up event.

Now in its 15th year, the clean-up drive starts tomorrow and runs until November 1. Last year, 51,064 volunteers collected 3,894 tonnes of rubbish from across Hong Kong.

Volunteers can sign up for the clean-up challenge that best fits their interests and schedules.

City Clean-up: with tips from an online toolkit, families, schools and offices can find easy ways to trim back what they throw out.

Country Clean-up: nature lovers may prefer to help by collecting rubbish left along hiking trails and in country parks, which spoil our enjoyment of the natural world.

Coastal Clean-up: many groups have organised rewarding days out helping to clear up marine debris, especially plastic, which is a constant blight on the city's beaches.

Lisa Christensen and Nissa Marion initiated the Zero Waste event three months ago to encourage Hongkongers to reduce the amount of rubbish sent to landfills by using fewer disposable items and recycling resources. And with the corporate challenge, they hope to focus business efforts by helping them set targets and come up with comprehensive solutions.

For more details, visit hkcleanup.org [5] or email info@HKcleanup.org [6]

More on this: [Hong Kong issues dire warning on landfills amid protests by residents](#) [3]

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