

The west's throwaway culture has spread waste worldwide

Packaging - much of it single-use food wrapping - has created a rubbish problem that now pollutes every corner of the world. Manufacturers got us into this mess, but it's up to us to dig ourselves out - and here's how



Plastic waste in Accra, Ghana. It takes 450 years for some plastics to biodegrade. Photograph: Christian Thompson/EPA

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In 2003, I was told by a restaurant owner on a Thai island that local fishermen used to wrap their lunch in banana leaves, which they would then casually toss overboard when done. That was OK, because the leaves decayed and the fish ate the scraps. But in the past decade, he said, while plastic wrap had rapidly replaced banana leaves, old habits had died hard - and that was why the beach was fringed with a crust of plastic. Beyond the merely unsightly, this plastic congregates in continent-scale garbage gyres in our oceans, being eaten by plankton, then fish; then quite possibly it'll reach [your plate](#) ...

This is a worldwide problem - we can't point the finger at Thai fishermen. The west started this. The developing world justifiably yearns for its living standards and, with it, its unsustainable [convenience culture](#).

The UK alone produces more than 170m tonnes of waste every year, much of it food packaging. While it has revolutionised the way we store and consume food, there is now so much of it that landfills can't cope. Some of it is poisonous, and some of it never degrades. It can take 450 years for some types of plastic bottle to break down; one type, PET, while recyclable, doesn't biodegrade *at all*. And yet only a third of plastic packaging is recycled. Indeed, as Rachele Strauss of the UK's [ZeroWasteWeek](#), says, we never actually throw anything "away" - it's really just put somewhere else.

But recycling is just a drop in the ocean - most of the environmental cost of our throwaway wrapping is upstream - in its manufacture. We were closer to an answer 30 years ago: what on earth happened to milkmen and bottle deposits? Now we live in an absurd age where a packet of crisps can have [seven layers of wrapping](#).

It's easy to despair at the scale of the task, but it isn't beyond humanity to solve it - look at how the world took action on CFCs: there are signs that the [hole in the ozone layer is now closing](#). Food packaging ought to be a doddle.

Manufacturers got us into this mess, and our governments must take responsibility. But will they? There are some signs the ship is creaking toward a better course: the words Reduce Reuse Recycle have been on conscious consumers' lips for decades; recycling is now commonplace, and there are newer initiatives like the plastic bag charge. We'd also do well to follow France's lead in banning plastic cutlery, cups and plates.

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As consumers, we can vote with our feet and our wallets. Even a cursory inspection online reveals a heap of [solutions for the canny shopper](#), from biopackaging for sandwiches and London Bio Packaging, and water-soluble paper to refill schemes becoming available on the high street.



Send us your tips for reducing food packaging waste

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So, we [asked readers](#) how they tackle the packaging problem. Many suggested we should create less waste to begin with - as so many groups, from the US-based WasteZero and the UK's ZeroWasteWeek, tell us. Rachele Strauss's mantra is: "If you go shopping, don't bring home a problem" - in other words, don't be lumped with a bunch of unrecyclable packaging. Readers agree: buy unpacked, say [Vinaya](#), [Tom Perks](#) and others. Buy fruit, veg and herbs loose - or better still, Strauss says, try to grow your own - on the windowsill or in a hanging basket if you've no garden.

Join a [veg box scheme](#) (also a good way to remind yourself what veg is really shaped like). Use farmers' markets if

you're near one, or local shops - butchers, fishmongers - and buy dry goods such as rice, other grains and pulses in bulk, preferably from places that offer refills.

And we can learn to reuse. "We love jars!" says reader Zo Zhou. "To store food, use as a takeaway coffee cup, as a vase, candle holder, storage canisters..."

One of the best things you can do to prevent waste (and readers [Emily H](#) and [LadyAlba](#) agree) is to learn to cook and become familiar with ingredients. It doesn't even have to be difficult: slow-cookers are a great alternative to ready meals, as are breadmakers. Both work their magic overnight and have produced fresh food by morning.

Another solution: zap wrapping at source. "It sounds a bit radical, but if we all started removing the packaging at [checkout](#), supermarkets might suddenly take notice," says Strauss - a point readers [Rozzle](#) and [tperrens](#) and [Andi Abigail](#) agree on. "Besides, supermarkets have access to better recycling facilities than their customers."

But some say we need nothing less than a [revolution](#) in how we consume, as The Story of Stuff has been arguing for a decade. This online campaign reveals the glaring gaps in our broken "materials economy", what fuels our consumer habits, the cycle of "planned obsolescence", and why we're so reliant on so much, well ... stuff. It points the way to a [circular economy](#) instead of designing things to fail, to [sustainable materials](#), and stepping off the treadmill of consumerism.

It's not as if we have a choice. This pale blue dot is our only life support system. If we don't look after it, those Thai fishermen won't be the only ones out of a livelihood.

Where you can help

Food redistribution at FareShare - Glasgow

The west Scotland branch of this nationwide surplus food redistribution charity gets meals to the people who need them the most, from hostels for the homeless to refugee centres. Pitch in with your time, food and funds. [fareshare.org.uk](#)

Organic, whole-ingredient food: Riverford, Devon

Guy Watson's organic meat and veg box scheme operates on a root-to-fruit, nose-to-tail philosophy: order chicken carcasses (for stock) with your fillets, and tops (for pestos et al) with your veg. Head to their fields on a 'glean', or eat graded-out produce in their restaurants ... [riverford.co.uk](#)

Ideas for waste reduction at Waste Less, Save More - Derbyshire

Sainsbury's might this week have seen a setback in their bid to halve domestic food waste within 5 years, but households taking part in their 2016 pilot programme in Swadlincote did achieve reductions of up to 75%. Check out their tips, gadgets and apps for inspiration. [wastelessavemore.sainsburys.co.uk](#)

Meals from food waste at Pay As You Feel - West Yorkshire

Leeds's Armley Junk-tion cafe - like all Real Junk Food Project endeavours across the country - diverts ingredients destined for waste, and you pay what you can for the dishes they become. There is now a grocery store operating on the same principle. [therealjunkfoodproject.org](#)

Zero Waste cuisine at Silo, East Sussex

Brighton's Doug McMaster won Best Ethical Restaurant at last year's Observer Food Monthly awards for his game-changing zero-waste ethos at Silo: at least 99% of the food they buy is eaten, composted or reused. [silobrighton.com](#)

Rescue unpicked veg with the Gleaning Network - Kent

Volunteers from @gleaningKENT were in Thanet this week picking 220 acres of 'excess' cauliflowers that were otherwise set to be destroyed. Find your inner farmer, and a field in need of harvesters near you. [feedbackglobal.org](#)

Waste-free fine dining: Scratch Menu, Spring restaurant, London

Skye Gynge has launched a three-course, £20 early-evening menu using seasonal scraps and food donations at her London restaurant Spring - where most of the Michelin-level mains cost markedly more than that. [springrestaurant.co.uk](#)

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