

## ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

**Directions:** Read the following passage condensed from “A Consumer’s Guide to Environmental Myths and Realities.” Then answer the questions that follow.

*In recent years, numerous groups, including federal agencies, have offered counsel on how Americans can be “good environmentalists.” Although well-intentioned, the advice is too often based on little more than uncritical acceptance of such core beliefs as “recycling is good.” From the perspective of the total environment, the advice is frequently wrong. Those who follow it may actually end up harming the environment more than if they were to ignore it altogether.*

*Here are five common myths:*

**Packaging is bad**

*This idea is now widely accepted by consumers who are concerned about the environment. But it’s not necessarily true. Packaging can actually prevent certain kinds of waste.*

*When a food is processed and packaged in the United States, byproducts such as rinds and peels are often used as fuel, animal feed, or in another economically useful way. By contrast, in Mexico, where packaging is less prevalent, such food byproducts become garbage. Compared with the United States, the average Mexican household throws away three times more food debris — 1.6 pounds per household per day, according to a University of Arizona study.*

*Food packaging also reduces spoilage. The complex layering of metal and plastics that helps keep some Keebler snacks fresh for up to six months, for example, lets the company distribute them throughout the country without having a plant in every city. Such packaging meets consumer needs and economizes on the use of resources.*

**Recycling is always good**

*In principle, most waste products — iron and steel, aluminum, glass, paper, and even tires — can be recycled. And, in fact, a great deal of recycling already takes place. More than 50 million tons of scrap iron and steel are recycled each year, as are 16 million tires. Over half of the aluminum cans in the United States are recycled, as well as one-fourth of the glass and plastic beverage containers.*

*But would universal recycling necessarily be better for the environment? The answer is no.*

*Recycling has environmental side effects. Curbside garbage-recycling programs often require more collection trucks — which means more fuel consumption and more air pollution. Some recycling programs use large amounts of energy and produce high volumes of water waste. Distant recycling facilities often necessitate considerable resources just to transport the stuff there.*

*Take paper recycling. Proponents argue that every ton of recycled newsprint saves 17 trees. But most of the trees used to make paper are planted explicitly for manufacturing paper. Less paper from virgin pulp means fewer trees planted by commercial harvesters. According to a study by Resources for the Future, a nonpartisan research organization in Washington, D.C., the net effect of universal paper recycling could actually be a decline in tree planting and tree coverage, as lands are converted to other uses.*

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**Nonbiodegradable products are bad**

Consumers have been told: anything that decomposes naturally is good, and anything that does not is bad. But most modern landfills are capped, inhibiting biodegradation of anything.

Biodegradable products, if disposed of improperly, can leach dangerous chemicals into the water supply. Nonbiodegradable products, for the most part, do not have this problem.

**Disposables are bad**

A 1990 children's television special produced by Home Box Office was designed to teach this idea. So, too, was the first version of the Environmental Protection Agency's booklet "The Environmental Consumer's Handbook." It was withdrawn after some members of the EPA's own staff complained about "oversimplification and inaccuracies."

Here are two examples of what's wrong. Some environmentalists have targeted juice boxes because they contribute to waste. But transporting empty glass bottles requires more trucks than transporting empty boxes, using more fuel and causing air pollution. And aseptic packages don't need refrigeration, saving energy.

Disposable diapers are also denounced as wasteful. But over its "lifetime," a cloth diaper uses six times more water than a disposable does. This matters a lot in western states, such as California, where landfill space is relatively abundant, but water is scarce. California residents who avoid disposables and wash cloth diapers may not be doing their environment a favor.

**Plastics are bad**

To most advocates of "green" consumerism, an aluminum container is best, glass second and plastic the worst. However, according to the economic and environmental research organization California Futures, of nonrecycled containers, plastic takes the least energy to manufacture.

Several municipalities have begun to ban some kinds of plastic goods on the assumption that plastics contribute to our waste problem. Actually, plastic materials comprise only about eight percent of municipal solid waste by weight.

Plastics are lighter and more efficient than many other kinds of packaging. A research organization in Germany examined the effects of eliminating all plastic packaging in that country. It found that energy consumption would almost double and the weight of solid wastes would increase 404 percent.

There's no doubt that Americans throw away a lot of stuff—about 180 million tons of solid waste annually. But the amount of waste discarded into landfills has remained fairly constant for decades. As William Rathje, a leading expert on garbage, has observed: "Americans are wasteful, but we have been conditioned to think of ourselves as more wasteful than we truly are." While we seek to protect the environment, let us take care to look beyond the "simple" rules that may do more harm than good.

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**For Analysis**

1. For each of the myths listed, name a reality cited by the author of the article.

Packaging is bad: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Recycling is always good: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Nonbiodegradable products are bad: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Disposables are bad: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Plastics are bad: \_\_\_\_\_  
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2. Would a study on packaging likely be more reliable if done by a food manufacturer or an independent research organization? Explain your reasoning.

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3. People often say that there are two sides to every story. How does this relate to the article?

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4. Does this article promote the idea that environmental concerns are not worth pursuing? Explain your answer.

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