

# The Three R's

from the *Chesapeake BayGull*, by David Owen Bell

**G**ETTING RID OF ALL OUR TRASH is not easy, and whatever we do with it usually has some negative impact on the environment. Landfills take up a lot of open space, and when not properly controlled, can pollute surface and ground waters, breed rats and flies, and just plain smell bad.

Incinerators are costly, and need a large amount of trash to run efficiently. This may actually encourage more waste. Much of the heavy metals and other toxic substances that aren't destroyed by burning are either released into the air or become part of the unburned ashes which often end up in landfills.

People often argue about these issues, especially when someone wants to locate a landfill or incinerator nearby. While people continue to debate which disposal method is "less bad" for the environment, there are things that each of us can do every day to simply make less trash (treat the disease, not just the symptoms).

First of all, **REDUCE**. This means making choices not only about what you buy, but how you buy.

Then **REUSE**. This means finding ways of giving products and packages second, third, and fourth uses.

Finally, **RECYCLE**. This means returning used newspaper, glass bottles, aluminum cans, and other recyclable stuff to be made into new paper, bottles, cans, and other....stuff.

## HEY! Wait a minute!

*Isn't this book supposed to be about water?*

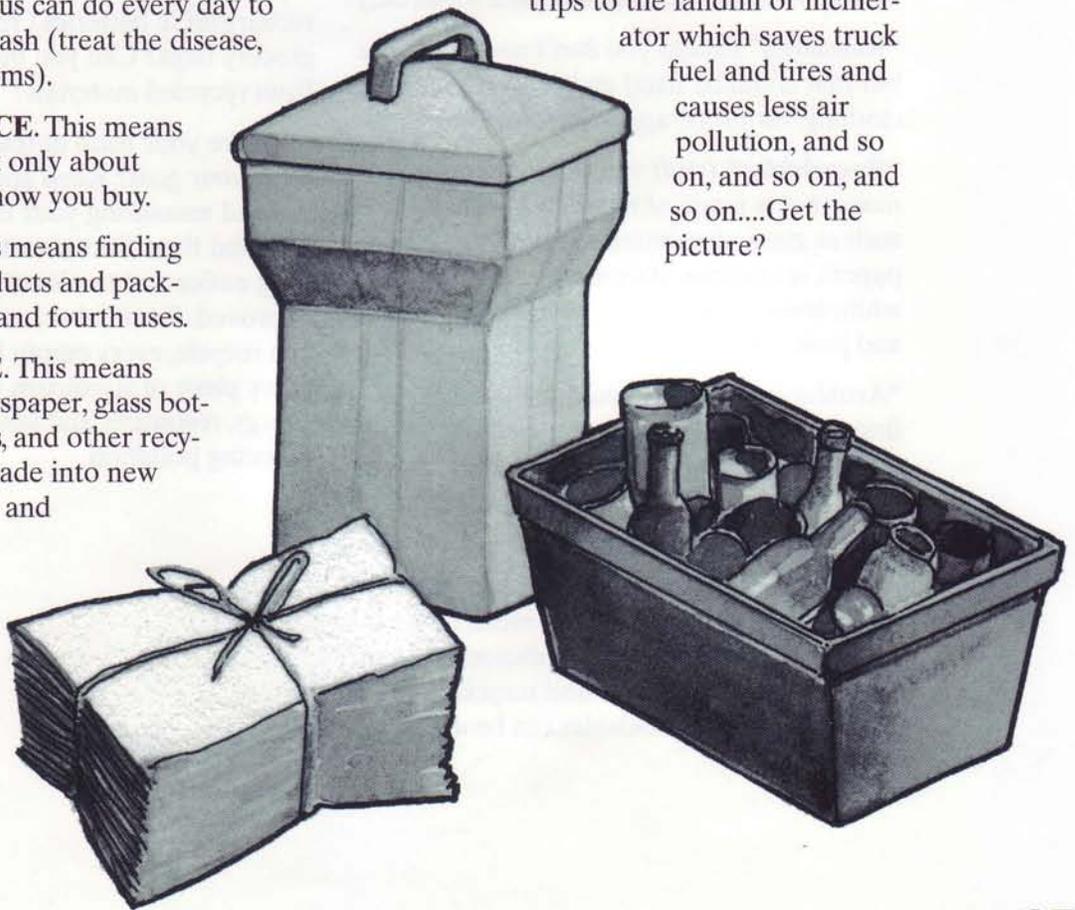
*Hey! Guess what? It is.*

Reducing waste helps keep harmful substances out of landfills and ground water which may connect to other bodies of water. Reducing waste means less trash for incinerators to burn, so there's less pollution entering the air shed.

Reducing waste saves energy, which means less fossil fuels burned which means less chemical nutrients and sulfur oxides in the air shed.

Reducing waste saves natural resources. More trees mean more habitat for wildlife. Less mining means less mining waste and erosion.

Reducing waste means fewer trips to the landfill or incinerator which saves truck fuel and tires and causes less air pollution, and so on, and so on, and so on....Get the picture?



# Take a Trash Survey

**C**HALLENGE STUDENTS TO MEASURE how much trash is produced at home or in school every week, then figure out ways to cut it in half.

Start by weighing the week's trash output on a scale or counting how many garbage bags or cans it fills. Estimate how much of it is made up of food waste, cans and bottles, paper, plastic, etc. If you can, presort the trash during the week of your survey by having different containers for each type. Record the totals or estimates.

Classify your trash and record totals. How much of it is made up of:

**“Disposables”** (things made to be used once, then thrown away, such as disposable pens, razors, diapers, and lighters, styrofoam cups and trays, etc.)

**“Compostables”** (food scraps, yard waste, etc.)

**“Reusables”** (things you don't need anymore but that could be fixed and reused, such as clothing, furniture, appliances, or toys)

**“Recyclables”** (stuff you don't need anymore that is made of recyclable materials, such as glass, aluminum, some plastics, newspapers, magazines, stationery and other white and colored paper, including memos and junk mail)

**“Avoidables”** (things you don't need in the first place, such as mail order catalogs, extra copies of newspapers and magazines, unnecessary clothing, toys, gadgets, or other stuff you really don't need)

Analyze your trash. How much of it can be recycled or composted? How much of it can be reused? How much of the disposables can be replaced by reusables and recyclables? How much of the avoidables can be avoided?

Go to the source to find ways of reducing waste. At home, this means the kitchen, bathroom, home office, and yard. At school, start with the classroom, then check out the cafeteria, office, science and art rooms, and janitorial department—anywhere trash is made.

Apply the three R's. Can you reduce by having your name taken off junk mail and catalog lists and by using both sides of a sheet of paper? Can your school wash and reuse sturdy plastic or metal lunch trays instead of buying disposable styrofoam ones? Can teachers and parents use their own washable mugs for coffee and tea instead of one-time disposables? Can your school buy recycled paper? Can you start recycling and composting programs at home and at school? Can you use washable cloth napkins and washcloths instead of paper towels? Can you buy rechargeable batteries? refillable pens? cloth grocery bags? Can you buy products made from recycled materials?

Measure your trash output again. Did you meet your goal? Keep applying the three R's and measuring your trash output every now and then. Sort your trash to make recycling easier and to identify areas that can be improved. Remember, every aluminum can you recycle, every empty box you reuse, every piece of styrofoam you refuse saves energy, resources, and landfill space while reducing pollution.

# Packing a Zero Waste Lunch

**L**EARNING WASTE-FREE WAYS TO pack their lunch is a way students can help conserve resources and make less waste. Offer them these guidelines from the Center for Environmental Education.

**No Disposables**—Use a lunch box or fabric bag to carry your lunch. If you bring a paper bag, reuse it when possible. Ban “good” bags from the cafeteria garbage can.

**Avoid Prepackaged Single Serving Containers**—Many parents buy these for convenience and their “treat value”. Since each “treat” creates a single serving of waste, ask parents instead to buy large sizes of things you like, such as yogurt, chips, and cookies, and pack them in reusable containers.

**Use Reusables**—Get durable plastic food containers, or wash out plastic margarine tubs, yogurt cups, etc. when they’re empty and reuse them over and over again. Empty water and soda bottles, bicycle bottles, and thermoses can be used over and over again.

**Use Recyclables**—Make sure the container you choose can actually be recycled in your area. Aluminum is accepted everywhere, but plastic containers and juice boxes are not easy to recycle.

**Avoid Buying Plastic Sandwich Bags**—Keep and reuse the bags that your food comes in (such as bread bags). These can easily be wiped, rinsed, and left to dry again and again. If you must buy food wrapping, look for unbleached wax paper or cellulose bags.

**No Styrofoam (polystyrene)**—Ever. This is a one-use item that is not easily recycled.



Pollution is a by-product of making polystyrene, an item whose useful life can usually be counted in minutes.

**Take Leftovers Home**—Even these don’t have to be garbage when you take them home for the family pet or compost pile.

Once you’ve mastered a low or zero waste lunch, see where else in your home or school you can practice the three R’s. How about zero waste birthday parties? Or camping trips?

## The Next Step

Take a tour of your home or school. Look for ways that we all impact water quality every day. Water drains, electrical switches and outlets, garbage cans, and wastebaskets are ideal places to start.

Whatever enters your home or school must eventually leave. What choices can we make that will lessen our impact?

## **Activity: Hold or Attend a Local Swap Meet or Yard Sale**

Have you ever been to a yard sale, swap meet, thrift store, or shopped on eBay? The next time you or your family is looking to purchase a particular item, look into shopping the “used” market. There are many goods in great condition that people are looking to get rid of.

Many households have “stuff” they don’t want or use anymore. What do you with these things? Throw them away? Hide them in the back of the closet? Selling, donating, or exchanging items with others is the perfect way to personally rid yourself of fully functioning objects without putting unneeded waste in a landfill and cluttering your home.

There are a number of ways to pass on the “stuff” you no longer want. If you have a small number of things, an appliance for example or a bag of clothes, you can trade or pass it along to a friend, post an ad on Craig’s List or in your local newspaper, or donate to a local charity (like The Salvation Army, Goodwill, etc.)

If you have a basement, garage, or house full of “stuff,” it may be time to hold a yard sale or swap meet. You and your family can choose to do this individually or choose to hold an event with classmates and their families, neighbors, or other community members. There is a good chance that there are others in your community that would be interested in participating in a group sale or swap.

So, what can you do? Be proactive. Talk to your classmates, friends, teachers, neighbors, and other community members and find out everyone’s interest. Choose a date that works for everyone and decide on a place to hold the event. It could take place at your school, in your neighborhood, at a local community center, or church. Get the word out and advertise this earth friendly way of shopping. This event is a win-win for all involved. Individuals get rid of stuff and find new treasures and nothing gets thrown away.

How does this model the three R’s. What are other ways to reduce, reuse, and recycle in your community? How can you promote the three R’s in your community? How can shopping at a yard sale help the Chesapeake Bay?