

From My Closet to Africa: The Dirt on Post-Consumer Recycling

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While performing the annual ritual of cleaning out my closets—sorting both worn and still-tagged clothing for Goodwill, consignment shops, and storage—I'm horrified by the knee-deep piles of clothing rejected for being outdated, the wrong size, stained or damaged: a summer dress from last season, a pair of jeans with a broken zipper, even the negligee from my wedding night. How did my closets become so overcrowded? Perhaps my position as a professor of fashion prompts me to maintain a certain “look,” necessitating a fully stocked, up-to-date wardrobe. Or perhaps I am simply a typical American.

In the United States, we consume 83.9 pounds of textiles per person per year. That's up from 63 pounds per person five years ago. Those figures do take into consideration non-apparel textiles such as carpet, but over the same period, carpet sales have actually decreased, which leaves us to safely attribute the increase to a rise in clothing purchases. Modern homes have closets on average 60 percent larger than homes in the 1960s. What is bought today gets discarded tomorrow. According to a report issued by the Environmental Protection Agency in 2003, the per capita daily disposal rate of solid waste in the United States is approximately 4.3 pounds, up from 2.7 pounds in 1960. Regardless of how dynamic or economically viable the modern fashion industry is, it is creating a gross overabundance of used clothing, releasing a plethora of stuff into the waste management stream. The good news is, because textiles are nearly 100 percent recyclable, this potential landfill disaster can be averted.

The bad news is, textile recyclers and waste management companies could be more effective if more people were aware of what they do and their potential to do even more. The textile recycling industry is one of the oldest and most established recycling industries in the world. Yet, in general, few people understand this "hidden" industry, its players or its reclaimed textile products. I have done research on textile recycling since 1999, exploring the cycle of clothing consumption from purchase to disposal to rebirth. This fascinating topic allows me to bring social meaning to an analysis of global systems.

Textile recycling can be classified as either pre-consumer or post-consumer waste; a textile recycling company removes this waste from the waste stream and recycles it back into the market (both industrial and end-consumer). Pre-consumer waste consists of by-product materials from the textile, fiber, and cotton industries that are re-manufactured into products for the automotive, aeronautic, home building, furniture, paper, apparel and other industries. Post-consumer waste has been purchased and worn (or not—as in my things that still had the tags on them) by the consumer. I am especially interested in the post-consumer waste sector of the recycling industry.

The post-consumer textile recycling process comprises myriad players, from consumers who sell their castoffs at garage sales or flea markets, to charities such as Goodwill Industries and Salvation Army, to for-profit recycling companies, to manufacturers who develop value-added products by grinding used fiber, to policymakers in the U.S. and developing countries, to savvy Japanese "pickers" who crave vintage Americana such as frayed Grateful Dead t-shirts or the perfectly ripped pair of faded Levis.

In the U.S. alone, this industry consists of roughly 3,000 mostly small businesses that together divert more than one and a half million tons of post-consumer textile waste annually. The largest and longest established companies are stable and have an established network of global accounts where used goods can be marketed. Many of the smaller or

newer recyclers see textile recycling as an easy business to get into, but then fail because they lack the global network necessary for market trading. While some companies specialize in exports to developing countries, other companies have found niches in transforming used clothing into value-added products such as wipers, chair pads, casket liners, cement fill and pet bed stuffing. In Europe, where fuel costs are much higher, some of the unwearable used clothing is even pelletized and burned. Their BTU and emissions levels are really quite respectable, even with a synthetic/natural textile blend; certainly, they are much better than those yielded by burning tires, a relatively common practice in America. Unfortunately, when I was exploring the possibility of bringing this technology to the University of Missouri, where I was previously a professor, I discovered that U.S. boiler systems are built differently than European ones. They allow more air in, which would incinerate pellets too quickly.

Textile recycling companies are strategically located throughout North America to reduce trucking costs. Many of the companies are located in urban areas (Los Angeles, New York, Toronto) where there is an abundance of used clothing; however, one of the largest recycling companies in the country is MidWest Textiles in El Paso, Texas.

MidWest Textiles receives a semi-tractor load of used clothing every day. This is then emptied onto a conveyor belt and sorted into approximately 400 categories, from bed sheets, to winter coats, to summer

dressess. Highly trained sorters mine for certain high-value items, particularly vintage pieces. Thom Paxton, head of the vintage division of Midwest Textiles, has an MFA and a talent for understanding what's cool or the next fashion craze. Few really great pieces are found in the truckloads that arrive but "diamonds in the rough" fetch a hefty price on the Japanese market, from a SoHo retailer, on eBay, or on the Paris auction block. One recycler from St. Louis claims that he has pulled enough valuable jeans from his conveyor to pay for his children's college.

After sorting, the clothes are baled, and then warehoused until orders for certain goods arrive. Maybe a broker in Sri Lanka wants a 1,000-pound bale of cotton shirts for disaster relief. Or an Italian account orders a bale of assorted acrylic (or wool or cashmere) sweaters to be mutilated back to the fiber stage and made into blankets. Or perhaps an American company asks for a mixed bale to chop up to make into non-woven casket padding liners.

Bales of used clothes are much needed for the poorest in the world. While the clothing traditions of local people still exist, American and European clothing castoffs, mitumba or salaula (Kiswahili and Bemba, respectively), are very much a part of the African landscape. They provide business opportunities for some and inexpensive clothing for many, with the rather unfortunate consequence that Western styles overwhelm native garments on the street, if not yet in ceremonial situations.

Some would ask that since our used clothing often starts as a charitable donation, why not export our used clothing to Africa for free? The answer is that Africa simply does not want to take all that we throw away. Africa is a different market, not just a dumping ground, and that continent's people need to be served with the specific supply that meets their demands. For-profit recyclers separate out what they know will sell. Clearly, Africans have no use for heavy coats. Most Africans also disdain skimpy tops and mini-skirts (tradition often prohibits women from baring themselves as much as they do in the West). Men's clothing fetches a higher price than women's clothing (women tend to retain native dress longer than the men). Shirts sell not because of their designer label, but because of their bright colors or more appropriate sizes (Africans have much smaller waists, in general, than our well-fed American population). By carefully sorting and selling our used clothing to the closely established networks that have been honed over the generations, entrepreneurship has been established; the appropriate clothing is shipped to Africa; and her people are clothed at a cost that is fair.

Individuals should be encouraged to donate their clothing to their favorite charity rather than throw it away. Charities will agree, though, that the supply far exceeds the demand, and they must offload much of it onto for-profit textile recycling companies. In Columbia, Missouri, a town of about 100,000 people, where much of my research was conducted, there was

no local for-profit recycling company; however, the one in St. Louis dispatches trucks to the Goodwill and Salvation Army in Columbia (over 100 miles away) to pick up their surplus.

Many municipalities do not offer any—let alone convenient—textile recycling. This is their loss because it often proves lucrative and can subsidize the rest of a recycling program. However, textiles do not easily fit into an established curbside recycling program because natural fibers mold and mildew when wet. The typical solution to this problem requires setting up big waterproof boxes where donors can drop their items.

I have recently supervised an independent study project where students were charged with setting up a small recycling facility in Boonville, Missouri, a small rural town about twenty minutes from Columbia. The company, called Unlimited Opportunities, is a center for training physically and mentally challenged adults. Employees used to paint parts for a major heavy machinery maker. When that company sent their operations overseas, it left the unemployed workers and a giant warehouse, complete with docks and a baling machine, empty. When I looked at the space, I determined that it had fabulous potential as a recycling center that could be attached to a Goodwill-type charity shop. Boonville had none at the time. Expecting to get two or three fashion-merchandising students interested in helping set up the business in exchange for independent study credit, I put a call out—and got twelve students to sign on!

They put together a business plan, pitched it to Unlimited Opportunities' board of directors and within six weeks, the shop opened. In the interim, the students had trained workers to sort clothing and polish shoes. Excess clothes are baled and sold to for-profit recyclers and today, Savvy Seconds has grown to a recycling house that not only sells used clothing but that also recycles aluminum, plastics and cardboard—a much-needed resource for the rural community. It's an economic, environmental, and human success story.

Americans discard huge volumes, but also huge value. Today, with resources and landfill space becoming ever more dear, it is a value that we can't afford to waste.

