

Where Cell Phones Go to Die....

We are a country addicted to electronic gadgets. It seems everyone wants the next hot gizmo fresh off the assembly line. Our need for the latest devices is so great the day the iPhone went on sale people were lined up by the hundreds outside retailers to get their hands on one. Apple has since sold 13 million iPhones. But our incessant need to be ahead in the gadget race has unseen impacts. Few consumers ask the question “where will my cell phone go to die” and even fewer know the answer. So many of us live by the creed “out with the old and in with the new” and it has far reaching effects (learn more at TheStoryofStuff.com). Americans are throwing away 130 thousand computers a day and 100 million cell phones a year. As technology is rapidly outdated our mounds of electronic-waste (e-waste) are growing just as fast, if not faster. In fact Dr. Allen Hershkowitz, a senior scientist with the National Resources Defense Council says e-waste is the “fastest growing component of the municipal waste stream.”

Each year more Americans are doing the right thing by recycling their e-waste. In fact electronics recycling is good business here in the states and e-waste companies are popping up all over. To get a step up on the ever growing competition a substantial amount of e-waste businesses are exporting some of the most toxic components to developing countries. Places where the processes used to extract precious metals such as copper and gold from electronic components are very primitive and extremely harmful to workers and the environment. Methods like open-air incineration and acid baths. The journal *Environmental Health Perspectives* published a study in 2007 that found lead levels 50 percent higher than limits set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the blood of children in Guiyu. Guiyu is a small village in China where e-waste is processed using these methods.

In response to the growing demands for regulation of exported e-waste the EPA (under our current administration) started asking exporters to notify the EPA for approval prior to shipping cathode ray tubes (CRT's) overseas. Other waste was free to ship anywhere in the world. But the US Government Accountabilities Office (GAO) says in a report published in September 2008, the EPA has done little to enforce the regulation. Hong Kong has sent back 26 freight container that left American shores illegally but the EPA has fined only one and only after the GAO identified the shipment. In fact 43 US companies were willing to ship CRT's when the GAO (posing as buyers from Asia and Africa) offered to buy the tubes. “Yet nearly all of them touted their environmental friendliness on their Web sites” The report states.

So who can we trust? We try to do the right thing and end up making things worse. Well a charitable organization called the Basel Action Network has launched the e-Stewards certification program. Their website states “e-Stewards Certification, [is] an accredited, 3rd party audited certification system that... gives customers even greater assurance that these recyclers are the most responsible and effective in the industry. This new certification for social and environmental responsibility in the e-waste recycling and asset management sector will be the first of its kind anywhere.” Check their website for a list of e-Steward certified recycling companies: (<http://www.e-stewards.org/index.html>).

In the wake of all this U.S. authorities have yet to develop a national approach for handling e-waste; waste which often contains toxic metals such as lead, mercury and cadmium. In fact the GAO report says “EPA officials told us that they have neither plans nor a timetable to develop an enforcement program.” With no end in sight we must speak up. We need to urge our state and federal representatives to support legislation that stops the export of e-wastes and develops a healthy domestic e-waste recycling industry. Go to the web-sites below to find out more and tell people what you find. If we make enough noise we can save lives and protect our environment. When you buy, think about where the products will end up and what the impact will be or just stop buying what will soon become trash.

Learn More....

National Geographic Article “High-Tech Trash”

ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2008/01/high-tech-trash/carroll-text

60 minutes Video “The Wasteland”

www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=4586903n

US Government Accountabilities Office report

www.gao.gov/products/GAO-08-1166T

A Short Film

www.storyofstuff.com