
The Recycling Religion

Segment Length: 6:52 minutes

Lesson Description:

How often do you recycle? Is there value to it or is it a waste of time and resources? In this segment, John Stossel digs into recycling and analyzes whether the effort is more harmful than beneficial to the environment. He also explores other ways of disposing of trash and material waste and poses questions: Should the government mandate this activity? Should individuals have the freedom to decide for themselves if recycling is worth their time and effort?

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Identify current ways of disposing of waste.
- Discuss the basic principles of recycling, including the importance of separating recyclable materials from trash and the common types of materials that are recycled.
- Analyze whether recycling is worth the time, energy, and labor by comparing recycling myths vs realities.
- Assess the regulations on waste disposal and recycling.

Concepts & Key Terms:

Circular Economy: A system aimed at minimizing waste and making the most of resources by reusing, sharing, and recycling materials as many times as possible, intending to create a closed system in which little or no new materials are used.

Landfills: A site for disposal of trash.

Sacrament: a religious ceremony or ritual recognized as particularly important and imparting divine grace.

Single-Stream Recycling: A system in which all recyclable materials are collected in a single bin or container to simplify the recycling process for consumers.

Preview Activity and Questions:

Use *Think, Pair, Share* to have students answer *one* of the questions below:

- A. What is the purpose of recycling? Do you think there is value in this activity?
- B. What are some of the rules and regulations around recycling?
- C. What are some alternatives to recycling?
- D. What are some ways we can reduce trash and the amount of raw materials used? Should this even be a concern?

OR

Distribute copies of the K-W-L worksheet to the class. Have students fill in the K and W sections. After showing the video, have students complete the L section and answer the questions at the bottom of the worksheet.

Viewing Guide:

We recommend that teachers show the video segment twice: first to allow students to view the video and focus on the issues presented, and second to allow them time to complete the viewing guide. After they complete the viewing guide, allow students a few minutes to work in pairs to share and verify answers.

Answers to Viewing Guide

1. recycle
2. plastic
3. materials
4. barge
5. parks
6. circular economy

The Recycling Religion

Viewing Guide

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____ Period ____

Teacher _____

Directions: As you watch the video, fill in the blanks with the correct words.

1. Recycling aluminum does save energy, but most of the other stuff is impractical to _____.
2. But people think most of our _____ is recycled.
3. Recycling is an industry that is using increasingly expensive labor to produce _____ that are worth less and less.
4. States turned this _____ away because alarmist media scared people about what it contained.
5. Eventually landfills are turned into ski hills, _____, and golf courses.
6. One time-consuming dream of theirs is a _____ economy where everything is reused.

Now, take a few moments to reflect on the video and answer the questions below:

What information in this video did you find most interesting or surprising? _____

Have your thoughts about recycling changed after watching this video? If so, how?

Discussion and Analysis:

1. In this video, recycling is referred to a "sacrament of the green religion." What does that mean? Do you agree? Why / Why not?
2. Which materials are currently recyclable? Which are not?
3. Do you think recycling helps the environment? Is there anything people can do to impact the environment or "save the planet," or is it more about control?
4. Would you continue to recycle if it were not mandated? Why / Why not?
5. Some say that recycling is a "feel good" activity. What does that mean? Would recycling be worthwhile even if the only benefit were to make people feel good about themselves?
6. To reduce the amount of plastic waste, would you and your family be willing to switch to reusable containers for things such as shampoo and laundry detergent? If yes, why? If no, would any changes be needed to get you to agree to reuse/refill those containers?
7. Discuss the future of recycling. What are environmental groups such as Greenpeace proposing?
8. Should plastic be banned? What are your thoughts on the recent bans of plastic straws and plastic bags? Have these bans helped the environment or created more problems?
9. Consider the resources that go into recycling. For example, how many times a month is recycling picked up? Are there two separate trucks that come by, one for trash and one for recyclables? Is recycling worth the resources, energy, and time used for recycling? What makes you so sure of your answer?
10. Some suggest that modern societies need to consume less, but is this essentially de-growth? Is producing less and consuming less a proper solution or just a way to control behaviors?
11. What if there were an invention that would allow all waste to be broken down and reused? Would that make recycling more appealing? How would you weigh the costs versus the benefits?

Discuss These Lines from the Video:

1. Recycling will save the planet....and that's what people believe.
2. This is material that came into the recycling facility from people's recycling carts, but is going to leave as trash.
3. The amount of plastic *actually* recycled is around 5%.
4. If you care about saving Flipper, you should put your plastic bottle in the garbage.

5. Landfills had plenty of room for it. Today they have more space than we will ever need.
6. Today's landfills are not the polluters they once were. Some sensible regulations make sure they don't pollute.
7. That is one of the reasons why recycling fails is because it's so complicated, people never learn the rules and why should they be spending their free time learning these rules?
8. When Los Angeles mandated recycling, they added 400 polluting garbage trucks.

Quotes for Discussion:

Corporations like Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Nestlé, and Unilever have worked with industry front groups to promote plastic recycling as the solution to plastic waste for decades, but the data is clear: practically speaking, most plastic is just not recyclable. The real solution is to switch to systems of reuse and refill.

– Lisa Ramsden

"Solid wastes" are the discarded leftovers of our advanced consumer society. This growing mountain of garbage and trash represents not only an attitude of indifference toward valuable natural resources, but also a serious economic and public health problem.

– Jimmy Carter

Most of the things we put in blue bins that are not recycled are put in the garbage because they are things waste companies can't make money off, and that is the true bottleneck.

– Tom Szaky

Recycling practices change, and subsequently, most people are doing at least one thing wrong, even if they are doing their best.

– Rebecca Smith

Activities:

1. Have students complete the **K-W-L chart** in class or for homework.
2. What are the myths and realities of recycling? Have students complete the **T-Chart** and compare their list with classmates.
3. What are the pluses and minuses of the government mandating recycling and what do you find interesting about the topic? Have students complete the **PMI** sheet.
4. People often forget that resources and time go into the recycling effort. Use the **Resources & Time Log** to track the resources and time your family spends on recycling.
5. We're told to recycle paper to save trees, but trees are a renewable resource. Research who plants the most trees in the U.S. each year and why. What would happen to the land on which trees are currently grown if recycling limited the number of trees needed? What environmental benefits do growing trees provide?

6. Consider other options to recycling. Make a list of whatever "out-of-the-box" ideas you can think of. Some examples: use recyclables for art and jewelry, donate to a consignment shop or shelter, or organize a donation/swap event within your community.
7. Research Carbotura and its Regenesys system, and create a slideshow presentation that explains what it is, how it works, and what the potential benefits are.
8. Interview your neighbors to get their opinions about recycling, then write an essay in which you discuss their different views.
9. Go to a local recycling facility and ask how the recycling process works in your town. Take a tour of the facility if this is possible. Ask the person you interview if you can record the interview for a class podcast or presentation.
10. Investigate how your school recycles. Are there separate pails for trash and recyclables? How many pails are for recyclable materials? Do these pails matter, or does it all go into one bin at the end of the day? Interview your school's custodian and learn what he or she does with the trash and recyclables at the end of the school day.
11. Does your school compost? If so, investigate and report to the class what is done and what the benefits are.
12. Imagine you are a leader of a country. Develop your government's policy on waste management and recycling.
13. What are your town's "rules" for recycling? Are they easy to follow? Anything you find confusing? Why does your town have these rules? Consider reaching out to a local representative or facility manager to find out. Write a paper with your findings.
14. Research consumer recycling groups such as Retold for clothing and Lions Club for used eyeglasses. What are their marketing strategies and ultimate mission? Using this information, come up with 1-2 market-based solutions for recycling used materials (clothing, eyeglasses, shoes, anything you can think of) and submit a marketing plan as if you were to create a business or 501(c)(3) charity.
15. Read John Tierney's NYT article, "Recycling is Garbage."
<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/06/30/magazine/recycling-is-garbage.html>
Select a recycling myth or statement given by recycling enthusiasts (e.g., We're a wicked throwaway society or Our garbage will bury us) and write a paper that supports or refutes the statement. Be sure to cite your source for the statement and to include relevant, up-to-date facts that back up your rationale.
16. Do western countries recycle more? Are there specific countries that have more landfills and therefore import more trash? Prepare a presentation of your findings and present to your class or other audience.

Name _____
Class _____ Period _____

Date _____
Teacher _____

The Recycling Religion K-W-L Chart

Directions: Complete the **K** and **W** sections prior to watching the video. After you have seen the video, complete the **L** section and answer the questions below the K-W-L chart.

K	W	L
What I know about recycling...	What I want to know about recycling...	What I learned about recycling...
Why is recycling referred to as "a religion" in this video?	If it's cheaper to put these materials into a landfill, should your town/city change its program? Why/why not?	Have you changed your mind about recycling at all? Why/why not?

Name _____
Class _____

Date _____
Teacher _____

Period _____

The Recycling Religion: PMI Chart

P = Plus: What might be some advantages of government mandated recycling?

M = Minus: What might be some disadvantages of government mandated recycling?

I = Interesting: What are some interesting perspectives of government mandated recycling?

+ Plusses +	- Minuses -	I

Should state and local governments mandate recycling? _____ Why/Why not? _____

After watching the video, do you think recycling is worth the time and effort from you and your family? _____ Why/Why not? _____

What do you find interesting about the "recycling religion?" _____

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____ Period _____

Teacher _____

The Recycling Religion T-Chart

Directions: In the left column, write down the myths about recycling. In the right column, write down the facts you have learned that refute the myths.

Recycling Myths

Recycling Facts

