

Some communities have programs to divert this E-waste from the waste stream but this is not happening reliably and is often sidestepped by the end consumers who do not want to make the extra effort to separate and turn in their old electronics.

Even when items are turned in for recycling or refurbishing, the end result is not good. It is estimated that 80% of North American electronics listed as “recycled” are actually exported, mainly to Asia. Once there, the “recycling” of electronics is not what you’d expect. Exported electronics are often smashed, not refurbished, and the object is to recover as much steel, plastic, copper and gold as possible. There is a booming market for metals and cheap labour to recover as much of it as possible. Circuit boards are heated by hand to recover the gold and the molten lead residue is simply poured onto the ground. Wires are burned at low temperatures to burn off the plastic so the metal can be recovered. Leftover parts and plastics are just dumped. Surplus toner is collected out of cartridges - often by smashing open the cartridge by hand, working in clouds of toner dust.

If you’ve never had the time or inclination to explore this dark underbelly of our high-tech society, now is the time to spend a few minutes and visit just one Web site:

www.crra.com/ewaste/ttrash2/ttrash2/index.html

An international treaty known as the Basel Convention was created in 1989 to counter these unsustainable and unjust effects of free trade in toxic E-wastes. The Basel Convention calls on all countries to reduce their exports of hazardous wastes to a minimum and, to the extent possible, deal with their waste problems within national borders. In 1994 the Basel Convention agreed to adopt a total ban on the export of all hazardous wastes from rich to poor countries for any reason, including for recycling. Unfortunately, the Basel Convention does not work well for North America because, although Canada has signed on, the United States has not ratified it and has intentionally exempted E-waste from the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act. Thus, if a

Canadian recycling company has a US branch which “refurbishes”, our materials can still be exported.

When exploring what would happen to our old computers, I was happy to discover that my local Solid Waste Authority has an E-waste diversion program in place and takes great care to ensure that their downstream recyclers follow the Basel Convention, do not export, and use environmentally sound reclamation methods. This program is free to all local households, in an effort to get the material diverted from the curbside garbage.

It diverts boxes of electronics for ethical recycling weekly. Companies have to pay a small fee, but it’s based on cost-recovery, as the Waste Authority is a not-for-profit organization.

Many companies still find it cheaper, however, to let a non-compliant “refurbisher/recycler” haul the techno-waste away without questioning the downstream handling. Even when handled inside Canada, the de-manufacturing, dismantling, shredding, and incinerating are often unregulated and create additional hazards. “Recycling” of hazardous wastes, even under the best of circumstances, has limited environmental benefit _ it simply moves the hazards

