

Reducing our waste

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How many of our mothers reminded us of the hungry kids in Africa when we left the table with food on our plate? While a half-eaten sandwich here or a forgotten apple there may not appear like much, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that wealthy countries waste 222 million tons of food annually. In the U.S. alone, we waste enough food in one day to fill the Blaisdell Arena 10 times over.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, approximately 40 percent of consumable food is discarded. When food rots away in landfills, it turns into methane, a greenhouse gas that is 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide.

Hawaii has historically been ahead of the curve when it comes to public policy and innovations addressing food waste and recycling. Since 1997, the city of Honolulu has required that large hotels, restaurants, grocery stores and other commercial establishments recycle their food waste. This program, in partnership with the city's recycling and bioconversion programs, helped divert 35 percent of the city's waste from landfills in 2006. While these policies are steps in the right direction, certainly more needs to be done. Several public and private initiatives around the state of Hawaii are leading the way in addressing food waste through innovative composting and recycling programs.

One excellent way to utilize food waste is through composting. Compost provides a nutrient rich fertilizer for soils, and any compost produced is incredibly beneficial to local farmers and growers. As recently as the 1950s, the Big Island produced 90 percent of the food consumed by local citizens. Today, as much as 90 percent of our food is imported.

Increased composting would reduce food waste, provide valuable services for our local farmers, and decrease our total green house gas emissions as less food is trashed in landfills and imported from the mainland.

Several businesses currently offer residential and commercial compost services and products in Hawaii. The Green Room and Hawaii Rainbow Worms offer numerous compost education programs and vermicompost bins for those with limited space. EcoFeed Inc., Island Commodities and Waiaha Farms provide commercial food recycling services for businesses around the state.

The Kokua Hawaii Foundation, an environmental education and awareness organization, has supported increased food waste recycling and composting programs through its Earth Action Projects Program. In the past two years, public schools around Hawaii have implemented successful schoolwide composting and food waste education programs that have reduced food waste and provided free fertilizer for the schools' gardens.

Food pantries are another easy and beneficial way to reduce food waste in Hawaii. Organizations such as Hawaii Foodbank and Aloha Harvest provide prepared and packaged foodstuffs to people in need around the state. In 2010, Hawaii Foodbank delivered around 11 million pounds of food, 3 million of which was fresh produce.

Making use of what we already produce is important if we are to adequately feed a population that has reached 7 billion. According to Tristram Stuart, food waste expert and a contributing author to Worldwatch Institute's "State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planet" report, the nearly 40 million tons of food wasted by U.S. households, retailers and food services each year is enough to satisfy the hunger of the approximately 1 billion malnourished people in the world. "State of the World 2011" highlights agricultural innovations -- including reductions in post-harvest losses -- in sub-Saharan Africa that are helping alleviate hunger and poverty.

Food is a precious commodity, but it is not always treated that way in the U.S. Simple lifestyle changes, like keeping track of leftovers, recycling wastes as compost, and donating surplus to food recovery programs in the state can have profound effects.

Hawaii is already making progress in reducing its food waste, but we need more of these types of initiatives if we are to significantly decrease the millions of tons of food that are thrown away each year.

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