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The International Trade In Toxic Waste: A Selected Bibliography Of Sources

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Call it a toxic memorial, a monument to loose laws and fast money. This monument, tons of municipal incinerator ash from Philadelphia, lies on a rural Haitian beach where it was dumped one night in 1986 by a barge called the Khian Sea.

The ship had entered the port with a permit to unload fertilizer. Fertilizer? Hardly! This cargo contained some of the most toxic chemicals on the planet--dioxins and furan and laced with heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, mercury and arsenic. As workers began heaping the ash only yards from the incoming waves, one crewman even stuffed his mouth with a handful of the flaky black cargo to prove its harmless nature. Nearly one fourth of the 13,000 plus tons of waste had been unloaded from the barge before the Haitian government intervened and ordered the ash reloaded onto the barge. But the Khian Sea disappeared under the cover of darkness, leaving approximately 3,000 tons of toxic ash on Haiti's beach.

The Khian Sea returned to Philadelphia with the remainder of its deadly cargo. The ship spent the next two years vainly seeking a dumping ground; it crossed the Atlantic, sailed around the coast of West Africa, through the Mediterranean, down the Suez Canal and into the Indian Ocean. When it finally pulled into the Singapore harbor it had a new name (the Pelicano), a new owner, and an empty hull.

No one is willing to take responsibility for this scandal. The city of Philadelphia blames the middleman who blames the barge owner. The owner claims the ash was still on board when the barge was sold. The tangled case went to court; finally in 1993, two executives of Coastal Carriers, operators of the Khian Sea, received modest fines and prison sentences for dumping in the ocean without a permit. The legal battle is not over yet. But how much longer will the ash sit on the beach, and who will remove it?

While the Khian Sea incident is one of the most notorious episodes of the international toxic waste trade, it is by no means an isolated incident. In Koko, Nigeria, 3,800 tons of highly poisonous waste, including potentially lethal polychlorinated byphenyls (PCBs), were found in drums at an open site; they were dumped by a local businessman who forged his cargo papers and bribed Koko port officials. An American chemical company sold 3,000 tons of fertilizer to the Bangladesh government, but 1,000 tons of ash from copper smelting furnaces was mixed into the fertilizer before it was shipped. U.S. officials verified that this altered fertilizer contained dangerous levels of lead and cadmium. In another case, several hundred mysterious barrels washed up onto the Turkish shore. When curious locals opened some of the barrels, they suffered from nausea and skin rashes. A few barrels even exploded. In fact, countless barrels of trouble have rolled down the economic slope to a number of poor, less developed countries: black South Africa, the former East Germany, China, Romania, Poland, Thailand, the Ukraine, and others.

The lure of foreign currency available in the international waste trade can be awfully tempting to cash-poor developing countries. In Papua New Guinea, for example, the government of the province of Oro negotiated a deal with a California firm to build a \$38 million detoxification plant to process 600,000 metric tons of toxic waste a month. The deal, had it gone through, would have generated an income approximately six times the annual provincial budget.

Unfortunately, the importing countries, enticed by the prospects of multimillion dollar boosts to their economies, often make these deals with little understanding of the health and environmental dangers involved. Most developing countries have neither the technical expertise nor adequate facilities for safely recycling or disposing of wastes.

Greenpeace observers have documented dozens of Third World recycling facilities which would not meet safety or environmental standards in the industrialized world. The substandard, even primitive, facilities contribute to the improper handling of hazardous wastes in these countries. In addition, many employees at these facilities lack adequate protective equipment. As a result, recycling-industry workers develop a variety of health problems. Laborers who melt down car batteries develop lead poisoning. Employees are exposed to cancer-causing dioxins and other toxic chemicals which are created when electronics industry wastes are burned. Workers are not protected from the toxic fumes created by the open burning of polyvinyl chlorides (PVCs). Other problems include mercury poisoning, increased rates of birth defects and miscarriages, kidney disease, cancer, and even death.

But the risks do not stop there. The air, water, and soil pollution that results from improper recycling ventures endanger the whole community. Equally as bad, much of the hazardous wastes which are exported to Third World countries ends up in their landfills where it creates the same ecological problems created by landfills in industrialized countries.

Eager to avoid negative publicity as well as to circumvent laws against the dumping of toxic wastes, many companies disguise their deadly exports with benign labels. Greenpeace estimates that 86% to 90% of all hazardous waste shipments destined for developing countries are purported to be materials for recycling, reuse, recovery, or humanitarian uses. These creative schemes have included selling waste materials as a source of fuel, shipping contaminated soil to be used as fill dirt for road construction, billing plastic wastes as raw materials for the construction industry, passing off aluminum waste as feed for livestock, and tagging waste from a metals processing plant as micronutrients for soil enhancement (i.e. fertilizer).

The importing countries are discovering that toxic wastes by another name still don't smell any sweeter. Indonesia was importing foreign plastics for recycling, but in 1992, after discovering that 40% of the imported material was not recyclable and that approximately 10% of it was actually toxic, the government banned any further importation of plastic waste.

It is ironic that stricter environmental protection in the West is contributing to the build up of dangerous wastes in the Third World. The export of hazardous wastes from the highly industrialized Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries to lesser developed non-OECD nations has grown dramatically in the last twenty-five years. Greenpeace estimates that in the twenty years before 1989 approximately 3.6 million tons of hazardous wastes were exported, but as much as 6662.6 million tons were shipped in only five years between 1989 and 1993.

Some measures have been taken to stem this toxic tide. By 1993, 105 countries had banned toxic waste imports. A number of regional agreements have been adopted or are under consideration. CARICOM, an association of 13 Caribbean nations, and the Economic Community of Western African States (ECWAS) have each approved regional bans on the importation of hazardous wastes. In 1991, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) adopted one of the world's strongest statements against the toxic waste trade, the Bamako

Convention on the Ban of the Import Into Africa and the Control ... of Hazardous Wastes Within Africa. In the Mediterranean area, the terms of the Barcelona Convention, which would also ban hazardous waste imports, is being completed. The Asian Waste Trade Coalition, an informal association of more than one hundred Asian environmental and humanitarian organizations, is being formed to arrest the flow of hazardous wastes into Asia.

The most significant international agreement, however, is the Basel Convention on the Control of the Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Waste and Their Disposal. This treaty, referred to as the Basel Convention or the Basel Pact, provided the world with the first clear set of principles for controlling the international trade in toxic waste. The UN sponsored this treaty which was adopted by 35 countries in 1989; by March 1994, 65 nations had ratified the pact. (The U.S. has signed but not ratified the treaty; therefore, it may send a nonvoting representative to each full Conference of the Parties of the Basel Convention.)

Critics of the Basel Convention blasted its weak stance against the toxic waste trade. The Convention asked, rather than required, industrialized nations to cease shipping hazardous wastes to less developed countries. In addition, wastes which were exported for recycling were excluded from even this modest request. No wonder so many recycling schemes were devised by Western companies. Finally in March 1994, the second Conference of the Parties of the Basel Convention adopted a full ban on all hazardous waste trade to developing countries--a move applauded by Greenpeace and other environmental groups. This ban doesn't take effect until December 31, 1997, however.

It is little wonder that the Third World has leveled charges of "toxic terrorism" and "garbage imperialism" against the highly industrialized world. As one African official phrased it, the Third World fears that it is being changed from "the industrialized world's backyard to its outhouse."

This selected bibliography has been compiled to aid researchers interested in studying this important environmental problem. The bibliography covers the period from 1980 to 1993 and includes monographs, journal articles, videos, dissertations, and United Nations and U.S. Government documents. It is arranged by type of document, and within types, it is generally arranged alphabetically by the documents' author.

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ORGANIZATIONS

These organizations can be contacted for further information on the subject:

Border Ecology Project
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602/432-7456

Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes
P.O. Box 6806
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Environmental Defense Fund
1616 P Street, NW
Suite 150
Washington, DC 20036
202/387-3500

Greenpeace International Waste Trade Project
1436 U Street, NW
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International Maritime Bureau
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International Organization of Consumers Unions
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Penang, Malaysia
60-4-20391

Natural Resources Defense Council
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New York, NY 10011
212-727-2700

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
(North American Office)
United Nations
Room DC2-0816

New York, NY 10017
212-963-8138

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1-800-ECOLINE. Toll free referral and information service sponsored by the Together Foundation and the Environmental Studies Program at the University of Vermont.