

# INSIGHT: CAN WE REALLY CLAIM IT'S GREEN TO RECYCLE?

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Many years ago, before I joined the illustrious ranks of the commercial records managers, I attended university in London and Amsterdam, where I studied and later worked as an environmentalist. While in the Netherlands, I laid claim to the fact that at university I was studying “grass” for a year. My main area of study was trees, in particular, habitat and forestry management. Once I had figured out that I wasn't going to make a living looking at trees all day, I moved on to the other end of the spectrum - where I now work in storing and managing one of the products of these trees.

## Recycling history

Recycling may be the buzzword of the moment, but is all recycling good for the environment? There are many things that are very important to recycle, but not all things benefit the environment from being recycled. The obvious one is glass.

Back in the 1990s everyone was recycling glass the world over - “bottle banks” could be found on every street corner and supermarket car-park for us to deposit our empty bottles. That was until someone realized that glass is just powdered limestone sand and sodium carbonate that will naturally degrade over time. It takes approximately 1/3 as much energy to make recycled glass as it does to produce the stuff from its raw constituents.

## Blue-sky thinking

I now work for a large international commercial records management company with locations in nearly 60 countries. When it comes to paper, we have reams of the stuff - beautifully boxed up and lined up on shelving stored in ideal conditions all over the world. I once worked out that if I employed one person to glance at every piece of paper we had in storage for less than two seconds (working an eight-hour shift, five days per week, with three weeks holiday per year), it would take that person approximately 6,744 years to complete the task. Working from 250 locations and averaging 130,000 air miles per year, I have plenty of time to ponder such statistics.

Like everyone else who works in the records management industry, our clients, in their own efforts to be good green citizens, come to us and ask us to securely destroy some of this paper we manage for them. Many of them even ask us to place purpose-made receptacles on their premises, so they can store their paper until we come to collect it, take away and destroy it, or “recycle it.” The main concern of the client is to ensure that whatever document or record we destroy is done securely so that its contents are eradicated and will never see the light of day again. On another long flight, I also calculated that globally, just within the company I work for, we securely destroy 130,844 times my body weight (a slight 115 kgs) every year.



## Questioning the value of recycled paper

At the PRISM conference held in Daytona Beach, Florida, 2009, I attended a very good session on green issues. I heard someone say that recycling paper after secure destruction is good for the environment and that we should be promoting this to our clients. This got me thinking. Is recycling paper, in fact, good for the environment? Paper is, of course, a commodity and shredded paper has a value. There are paper mills all over the world and regions of Asia that are willing to pay hard cash for the product. But on the long flight back from Florida to Hong Kong, I pondered the premise even more and wondered if recycling paper is good for the environment and something we can and should claim as being a “green” activity.

## Green or not ... What happens when we recycle?

Paper is made of a renewable source. By this I mean that if we cut down a tree and make paper from it, you can grow another tree. Not all paper is wood pulp-based, but it does all come from renewable sources.

Most trees used in the manufacture of paper are specifically grown for that purpose. The figure varies, but from a little research on the Internet, it seems that at least 90 per cent comes from purpose grown trees. Loss of trees and habitats in our rain forests are not generally attributed to the manufacture of paper. However, large plantations of trees for paper manufacture can still have negative impacts on the environment. Many of the plantations are made up of trees that are not native to the environment in which they are grown. This can cause a detrimental effect on the local habitats.

Paper products are bio-degradable. Apart from perhaps some ink products that may have a toxic effect and the metal or plastic clips that accompany some documents, if you stick paper in a hole in the ground, it will naturally decompose into an inert organic material.

When paper is recycled, it takes a lot of energy, water and chemicals. Much like glass, recycling paper takes more energy and produces more pollutants than manufacturing paper from new. However, due to the demand of paper and paper products it is still commercially viable to do so. The unfortunate reality is that many paper mills are situated in regions and countries where environmental concerns are not always top priority.

As one of our services, we need to securely destroy documents and records. But when we send the product off to the paper mills for pulping and recycling, we need to be very careful about making claims that this is good for the environment.

Ultimately, and I am speaking here as one who cares about trees and habitats, what would truly benefit the planet, would be a reduction in paper overall. Something that we are trying is the promotion of e-billing, web ordering and e-receipts for all of our activities. If I converted all my clients to e-billing, this would save approximately 12 trees per month (or one small woodland) each year, given that an average tree produces 9,000 sheets of paper. If, as an industry, we all work together, we can save many hundreds of thousands of reams of paper. I believe this is an even more important message and one that we should be promoting to our clients.

*The power of memory*

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