

Ryan Call

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### The Historical Development of Recycling in Humboldt County

When trash or plastic bottles are discarded in their respective bins, it takes no effort to simply forget about their existence. The waste is conveniently out of sight, and conveniently out of mind. Waste's journey does not end in a bin. Waste management is a crucial and often overlooked part of everyday life. Although the recycling model and narrative that has developed over the last half century has been far from truly sustainable, recycling has become an institutionalized pillar of waste management and environmental consciousness. Environmental issues are often framed by considering the how the present moment will influence the future, but this paper takes a different path and examines how the present moment came to be through various historical developments. Over the last forty years, environmental activists in Humboldt County have challenged a simplistic, pro-consumerism recycling narrative by publishing newsletters that prioritize environmental concerns and have contributed to a sense of identity and community.

Ever since the development of American recycling in the early 1970s there has been a continuous conflict between corporate, industrial interests and grassroots environmentalist interests. Industrial interests, particularly bottling industries, are interested in generating profit from selling their products, while environmentalists are interested in protecting the environment. Environmentalist can be broadly defined, but for this project environmentalist will refer specifically to someone who prioritizes forms of waste management that lessen environmental degradation.

The conflict between environmental and industrial interests over recycling has been analyzed before. Environmental sociologist Andrew Jaeger and environmental historian Bartow Elmore show how recycling was institutionalized to serve industrial interests. Political geographer Mark Usher used discourse analysis on how environmental activism has created a source of community identity. This paper shows how these two arguments have intersected on a local level in Humboldt County, California.

While Humboldt County is undoubtedly a unique bioregion, the issues surrounding waste management are similar to those of other rural areas.<sup>1</sup> Beginning with European colonization of Humboldt County over one hundred years ago, the area's two main industries, logging and fishing, extracted resources at a high rate from the environment. Throughout the last half-century, environmental activism has changed Humboldt County's reputation. Today, Humboldt State University markets itself as a leader in sustainability and environmental consciousness.<sup>2</sup> What role, if any, did the recycling and waste management industries play in how this reputation has developed? How have environmental and industrial interests competed on a local level?

To answer these questions, the first step was to try and understand a sense of what environmentalists thought about important developments as they unfolded. Environmentalist newsletters such as *Econews*, *The Recycler*, and local news pieces serve as useful primary sources because, along with the factual information they provide, they reveal the organization and their various authors attitudes on the subject at a given time. A historian can analyze how language is used in the sources to trace how discourses on the subject develop. Discourse

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<sup>1</sup>Margaret Gainer, "Conversation about Recycling in Humboldt County," Interview by Ryan Call, March 4, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Humboldt State University Office of the President. "Mission, Vision, and Values." Accessed 5 March 2019.

analysis examines how language is used to create meaning and adds another layer of depth beyond the surface-level narrative that is presented.

Before digging into the history of this topic, it is important to understand what recycling is and how it works in order to contextualize the previously mentioned conflict. Recycling is defined as, “removing and recovering reusable resources from the waste stream.”<sup>3</sup> The purpose of recycling is to divert potentially valuable materials away from landfills. Recyclable material (also known as recyclables) include various plastics, paper, cardboard, aluminum cans and glass. Recyclables are transported by a curbside pickup service or are dropped off by individuals to a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF) where the recyclables are processed into raw materials.<sup>4</sup>

Depending on the distance to the closest MRF, a transfer station acts as a midpoint between the consumer and an MRF. The cost of gas and labor has sometimes outweighed any potential profit created by selling recyclables to the MRF.<sup>5</sup> This shows that the recycling system that has developed is a compromise that satisfies neither industrial nor environmentalist interests. From the MRF, the raw materials are sold to a broker who then sells it to companies who create products from recycled materials, completing the cycle of recycling. One major problem that will be expanded on later is that there is not enough demand for raw recycled materials, especially plastic, so recycled materials pile up.

The recycling system that exists today has come a long way in the last half century, both technologically and conceptually. Before recycling became a key part of waste management, recyclables were considered garbage and simply discarded in a dump along with the rest of solid waste. It is important to make the distinction between a dump and a landfill because a landfill has

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<sup>3</sup> Debra L Strong, *Recycling in America: A Reference Handbook*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO), 1997, 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Recycling in America*, 16

<sup>5</sup> *Recycling in America*, 17.

at least some regulations that mark a transition in environmental regulation. A dump is a site where “virtually anything considered unwanted waste is left.”<sup>6</sup> Dumps were often open burn sites where solid waste was incinerated to reduce the amount of room the waste occupied. In 1976, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) ordered all dumps to be replaced with landfills which, at the time, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defined as “land disposal facilities that will have no adverse effects on health or the environment.”<sup>7</sup> Of course landfills still have adverse effects on the environment, but the passing of the RCRA marked a significant milestone in environmental regulations because the federal government now played a part in regulating waste management.

The main dump (which became a landfill) in Humboldt County is located on Cummings Road, just outside of Eureka, the largest city in Humboldt County.<sup>8</sup> The dump was privately operated and used the “open burn” method from 1933 through 1969. In 1971, the Cummings Road dump became a regulated landfill which was owned by the Eureka Garbage Company. In 1999, Humboldt Waste Management Authority (HWMA) bought the landfill and closed it by 2000.<sup>9</sup> Since then, HWMA has overseen closing off the landfill and rehabilitating the area. HWMA’s control over the Cummings Road landfill is important because it indicates that institutionalized waste management in Humboldt County has invested in the environmental issues that the community was concerned about.

The waste management practices of a community reflect the environmental attitudes of the individuals who make up that community. While environmentalists once stressed recycling

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<sup>6</sup> *Recycling in America*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Recycling in America*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Humboldt Waste Management Authority. “About Us.” Accessed 6 March 2019.

<sup>9</sup> The six districts that make up HWMA are the cities of Eureka, Arcata, Blue Lake, Rio Dell, Ferndale, and Humboldt County itself. Trinidad and Fortuna are not part of HWMA.

as a top priority, the complications that have risen in the last few decades have shifted attitudes towards focusing on stopping the problem before it starts by reducing consumerism. The call for “returning to returnables” has become increasingly popular among environmentalists as a way to decrease overall waste.<sup>10</sup> This idea refers to how in the first half of the twentieth century, soda and milk was distributed in glass containers that the beverage companies would take back, sanitize, and reuse. Bottling companies used to be responsible for collecting and reusing bottles, but they switched to single use bottles to reduce business expenses in the early 1950s. Single use bottles are mainly used today. These bottles weigh less than reusable bottling which allowed distribution centers to ship more of their products for a lower transportation cost. By keeping transportation costs low, beverage companies could tap rural markets (such as Humboldt County) that used to be too expensive to ship to. While beverage and bottling industries profited from cutting out the middleman and reducing transportation prices, it was now up to the consumer to handle the increased volume of packaging waste. The responsibility of paying for and handling waste shifted from the industry itself to the taxpayer or recycling service subscriber, depending on the system that a community uses.

Recycling began as an environmentally conscious effort to lessen the volume of waste going to landfills. Since there was a potential value in the recycled material, industry motivated by profit harnessed this system to work for them. This transition from recycling as grassroots, environmentalist effort into an institutionalized part of waste management can be explained by examining the competing interests during this period. Jaeger uses Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony to explain the institutionalization of recycling. Cultural hegemony is the idea that the dominant group, whatever that group may be, can retain power not through force but

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<sup>10</sup> Gainer, “Conversation about Recycling,” March 4, 2019.4-

through culture because the dominant group can control the flow of information that the subordinate group receives. By controlling information and media, the dominant group convinces the subordinate group that their interests are the same. In this case, Jaeger argues that industrial interests have successfully convinced the public to embrace a recycling system that puts corporates ahead of environmental concerns. The beverage and bottling industries, such as Coca-Cola, attempted to derail the environmental movement in the early 1970s that threatened their business by using the “Keep America Beautiful” (KAB) organization.<sup>11</sup> Keep America Beautiful was created in 1953 as an anti-litter nonprofit which has been ran by beverage industry CEOs and used KAB as a puppet to control the national narrative on recycling.<sup>12</sup> Jaeger claims that the idea of “individualized environmentalism” which “focus[es] on consumption rather than production and the activities of individuals rather than institutions,” developed because the bottling industry wanted to avoid tighter environmental regulations.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, one of the first “accomplishments” of KAB was successfully pressuring the state of Vermont to lift a 1953 ban on single use beverage containers. Vermont, similar to Humboldt County, prides itself on their natural beauty, and the increase of beverage containers was leading to litter problems. Environmentalists in Vermont argued that the beverage industries that manufactured these bottles and cans should have at least some sort of financial responsibility in addressing the growing waste management problem. Even though KAB’s official purpose was to educate the American public about environmentalism, it did so with the bottling and packaging industries interests as a priority. According to Elmore, “KAB worked to dissuade voters from supporting extended producer responsibility programs that would require industries to internalize

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<sup>11</sup> Jaeger, Andrew Boardman. “Forging Hegemony: How Recycling Became a Popular but Inadequate Response to Accumulating Waste.” *Social Problems* 65 (2018): 402.

<sup>12</sup> Jaeger, “Forging Hegemony,” 403.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 396.

the costs of waste disposal.”<sup>14</sup> Under the mask of Keep America Beautiful, corporate industry successfully pushed the responsibility of waste management (which the bottling industry itself was once responsible for) onto the taxpayer or recycling service subscriber.<sup>15</sup>

The development of a curbside recycling program was also a project orchestrated by industry as a way to avoid stricter industrial waste regulations.<sup>16</sup> Elmore claims that curbside recycling services that developed in the 1980s was proposed to be a “fix-all” for waste management instead of creating legislation that would force industry to take financial responsibility for the waste they produced.<sup>17</sup> In addition to having taxpayers pick up the cost for waste management, beverage and packing industries could buy from a market of recycled raw materials (at a low cost because of the growing abundance) for their new products and then claim to be “environmentally friendly” because they used recycled materials. Initially environmental concerns were an afterthought, although a “green image” has become an effective marketing strategy.<sup>18</sup> This aspect of how institutionalized recycling developed shows that there is a gap between discourse and practice.

In the early days of recycling, there was not a perceived gap between discourse and practice. Recycling in Humboldt County began in 1971 with the creation of the Arcata Community Recycling Center (ACRC) as part of the Northcoast Environmental Center (NEC). The ACRC was one of the first nonprofit recycling centers in the United States.<sup>19</sup> When the ACRC opened, a newspaper article said that by recycling, Humboldt residents can, “demonstrate

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<sup>14</sup> Bartow J Elmore, “The American Beverage Industry and the Development of Curbside Recycling Programs, 1950-2000,” *The Business History Review* 86, No. 3. (Autumn 2018) 487.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 485.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 477.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 497.

<sup>18</sup> *Recycling in America*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Gainer. “Conversation about Recycling in Humboldt County.” Interview by Ryan Call. March 4, 2019. Phone conversation, 42:36.

the seriousness of their anti-pollution concerns.”<sup>20</sup> This article shows that environmental concerns were at the heart of early recycling efforts in Humboldt County. Before 1980, recycling was not an institutionalized part of waste management throughout the United States. Recycling operations happened on a local grassroots level.<sup>21</sup> Margaret Gainer, the director of the ACRC from 1976 to 1981, remembered, “What we were doing was pretty darn progressive... the sad thing is that we were way ahead of the curve and we no longer are.”<sup>22</sup>

Part of being “ahead of the curve” meant actively practicing environmentally conscious waste management and educating the public on environmental issues. In the 1980s, environmentalists in the United States began to stress that the popular slogan “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” should be understood in a hierarchical order.<sup>23</sup> While recycling was still a more responsible way to manage waste compared to dumping, *reducing* consumerism and *reusing* products cut out the problem of creating waste at the start.<sup>24</sup> This change in the prevailing environmentalist message has clearly been a direct threat to the packaging and bottling industries whose business relies on selling their products.

This development in environmentalist thought was reflected in their publications. *Econews* was created as the NEC newsletter and has been used to share information on a number of different environmental issues. As *Econews* continued to write about recycling over the years, the contributors often criticized how Americans may think they are being environmentally conscious by recycling, but they are still generating an enormous amount of waste, especially by using plastic bottles. Any hope for business growth depends on selling more of their products,

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<sup>20</sup> “Recycling Center Open, 650 A. St, Arcata.” *The Times Standard*, July 15, 1971. Page 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Recycling in America*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Gainer, “Conversation about Recycling,” March 4, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Campus Recycling Program, “The Recycler,” Humboldt State University, Vol 4 No 2, Dec 1993.

<sup>24</sup> The phrase “Reduce, reuse, recycle” now includes primarily *refusing* unnecessary products and *rotting* organic waste through composting.

which directly contrasts with the environmentalist message that insists that the public should buy less. Even though using recycled material is more eco-friendly than always using virgin materials, industry successfully slipped past the “reduce and reuse” aspect of environmentalism.

Recycling as an individualized environmental action became popular with the public but the practices of reducing consumerism and reusing materials were not reflected in the amount of recyclable material generated. As early as 1997, Americans created so much recycled material that the resource recovery industry could not keep up.<sup>25</sup> The abundance of raw recycled material drove market prices down, which put a strain on the same recycling system that was created to handle all of the waste.<sup>26</sup> As the abundance of recyclable materials grew and their prices dropped, smaller community-ran recycling centers, such as the ACRC, ended up closing their doors while corporate recyclers took over.<sup>27</sup>

The Humboldt recycling community took a sharp turn in 2011 when the ACRC was forced to close. In 2007, the ACRC built an 8 million-dollar MRF on the Samoa peninsula, across the bay from Eureka with the expectation that they would be processing the recyclables that HWMA received. In 2010, the HWMA board of directors voted to buy the MRF in Samoa from the ACRC. Instead of pursuing that purchase, HWMA signed a contract in 2011 to send their recyclables to Solid Waste of Willits, 130 miles south of Eureka.<sup>28</sup> The ACRC saw this move as an attempt to sabotage their business, which would put them in a position of selling the Samoa MRF at a foreclosure price.<sup>29</sup> The ACRC sued HWMA, and after a drawn out legal battle, the lawsuit was settled with neither side admitting wrongdoing.<sup>30</sup> Since then, Recology, a

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<sup>25</sup> Strong, *Recycling in America*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Strong, *Recycling in America*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Strong, *Recycling in America*, 16.

<sup>28</sup> Humboldt Waste Management Authority. “About Us.” Accessed 6 March 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Grant Scott-Goforth, “ACRC v HWMA: Settled,” *The North Coast Journal*, April 15, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Will Houston, “Arcata recycling lawsuit dismissed; nonprofit to dissolve,” *The Times Standard*, April 15, 2015.

San Francisco based company has moved in to the Samoa MRF and provides curbside recycling for Eureka and Arcata.

An unintended consequence of making recycling easier is that community involvement in waste management has declined. One problem facing HWMA and Recology today is that they are desperately trying to inform the public about the problem of contaminated recyclables. There also seems to be confusion in the public about what is and is not recyclable. This educational mission has become much more difficult since recycling has lost the enthusiasm of environmentalists, and the practice itself has become institutionalized. Environmental issues intersect with political and social issues, and while there are key voices that articulate the issues and propose policy changes, it takes an invested community to create support for these issues. In a 1986 issue of *Econews* that celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of the ACRC, Kate Krebs reflected that the “Community has consistently been in full support ... all this success of the ACRC is based on people”<sup>31</sup> The same cannot be said for institutionalized recycling today because recycling has blended in with other “out of sight, out of mind” utilities.

The early days of recycling looked much different than the curbside pickup that is “out of sight, out of mind” today. One point that sets environmentalists apart from people working in waste management is that environmentalists volunteer their time and effort for a cause they believe in. On the fifteenth anniversary of the ACRC opening, Krebs pointed out that the success of the ACRC was initially built on, “volunteers with a vision but no practical recycling experience.”<sup>32</sup> Although recycling could generate some profit, what really drove environmentalists to invest their energy was a sense that what they were doing was helping the environment. Recycling one’s own waste may be an act of individualized environmentalism, but

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<sup>31</sup> *Econews*, Vol 16 No 6, July 1986.

<sup>32</sup> “Recycling Grows Up: ACRC Turns 15, Faces Bright Future.” *Econews* Vol 16 No 6, July 1986, 8.

the volunteers at the ACRC and CRP had a shared vision of what waste management in Humboldt County should look like. Out of this shared vision, a sense of community formed.

The theory behind Benedict Anderson's seminal work on the development of nationalism, *Imagined Communities* applies to recycling in Humboldt County on a micro level. Basically, Anderson's theory says that through mass media, people who have never met one another can still develop a sense of shared identity, or an imagined community, because they are exposed to the same information. By appealing to people who were interested in environmental issues, the newsletters *Econews* and *The Recycler* put their readership literally on the same page and became a vehicle to organize volunteer opportunities for the community.

While industry and environmental activists were struggling to shape the direction of recycling to fit their interests, college students in Humboldt threw their support and enthusiasm behind the activists. At Humboldt State University (HSU), students took pride in the natural beauty of Humboldt County and their reputation of being environmentally friendly. In 1991, the student-ran organization The Campus Recycling Program published their first educational newsletter, *The Recycler*. One point that sets *The Recycler* apart from *Econews* is that the HSU students tended to be more optimistic about their role in shaping the future. Each newsletter disclaimed that even though the organization was funded by the student government, Associated Students (AS), AS did not censor their newsletter.<sup>33</sup> Since *The Recycler* was not censored, the content can be understood as ideas that came directly from the student contributors. Throughout the 1990s the newsletter was published consistently and in the early 2000s it was published sparsely. As the environmentalist attitudes evolved towards focusing on waste reduction, their

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<sup>33</sup> Campus Recycling Program, *The Recycler*, Humboldt State University, Vol 6 No 1, Nov 1994, page 7.

organizations changed their focus as well. By 2010, the CRP officially became the Waste Resource and Reduction Awareness Program (WRRAP) which prioritizes waste reduction.<sup>34</sup>

Again, waste reduction is in direct conflict with industrial interests. However, while industrialists generally viewed environmental issues as an economic drain, there was one part of recycling that served their interests. The packaging industries saw the enormous volume of recyclable materials, particularly aluminum cans and cardboard, as an opportunity to reduce their costs of operation. The more the public recycled, the more abundant recyclable materials were and thus the price fell. It was in their economic interests to help divert the flow of recyclables from the landfill to the MRF, where they could buy the recycled materials for a lower price than virgin materials. When a business buys recycled materials for their products and manages to sell them, the “cycle” of recycling is completed.

A 1981 report by the Humboldt County Waste Advisory Committee shows that Coors Distributing Company recycled *over ten times* as many aluminum cans than the rest of the county, including the ACRC combined did.<sup>35</sup> The beverage industry clearly had an interest in reclaiming aluminum, which had a relatively high price at the time. Coors offered a one-cent return on each aluminum can, which proved to be an effective incentive to encourage people to recycle. The one material that has proved to be too expensive to recycle is the same material that has skyrocketed in production over the last half-century: plastic. It is no surprise that plastic is the enemy of environmentally conscious waste management. As early as 1986, *Econews* contributor Kate Krebs claimed that, “plastic recycling on the North Coast is a myth, as it is for

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<sup>34</sup> Humboldt State University Waste-Reduction & Resource Awareness Program “About Us,” accessed April 7, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Humboldt County Solid Waste Advisory Committee. “Humboldt County Solid Waste Management Plan.” March 1981.

most consumers in the nation.”<sup>36</sup> The increase in plastic in the recyclable waste stream has directly impacted recycling on a global level.

Every American involved in recycling and waste management, no matter if they had corporate or environmental interests, encountered a serious problem in 2018: China, formerly the world’s number one importer of recyclable materials, put their “National Sword” policy in effect which banned importing certain types of recyclables and heavily restricted the materials that they do accept.<sup>37</sup> Recycling has become much less profitable under National Sword and the market for recycled paper has completely bottomed out.<sup>38</sup> In a short period of time, recyclable material that were once had value returned to being simply trash.

Recycling pickup services today look very similar to how garbage is handled. In Humboldt, Recology has certainly made recycling more convenient for residents with their single-stream curbside pickup. This means that recyclables do not have to be sorted as they once were. The recyclables are then sorted at the MRF in Samoa. The problem is that when recycling is mixed together, it is more likely to be contaminated by food waste. Recyclables must be clean in order to be sold as raw materials, or else the contaminated recyclables are sent to the landfill. China’s National Sword policy has further tightened restrictions on how contaminated recyclables they buy can be. Today, the uncertain state of recycling on a global level and the pileup of recycled materials reflects the limits of this form of waste management.

The transformation of recycling in Humboldt County can be understood as a sort of parabola, having risen and fell over the last half-century. American recycling started through the

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<sup>36</sup> *Econews*, Vol 16 No 5, June 1986, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Hannah Sargent, “What is Happening to Humboldt County’s Recyclables?” The Northcoast Environmental Center. August/September 2018. Accessed 3 March 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Linda Wise, “Conversation about Recycling in Humboldt County.” Interview in person by Ryan Call. March 11, 2019.

environmentalism movement of the 1970s and becoming popular with the public through a combination of environmental awareness and the cultural hegemony of the bottling industry in the late 1980s. The enthusiasm behind recycling has steadily fallen in the twenty-first century due to the proliferation of plastics and China's National Sword policy. Environmentalists newsletters contributed to a sense of community that challenged the simplistic narrative on recycling. Cultural hegemony that prioritizes recycling has been largely successful, but environmentalists continue to challenge it by evolving recycling programs into zero waste initiatives. Members of the ACRC created Zero Waste Humboldt, and HSU's CRP became WRRAP. Although recycling as an individualized environmental action has been disproven, the sense of community that was created through the ACRC has had a lasting impact on how waste management is practiced in Humboldt County.

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