

## 20 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT GARBAGE

**1** Dawn of the dump: The oldest trash heaps, called middens, are in South Africa and contain shells roughly 140,000 years old. Middens—which may also include bones, charcoal, feces, and pottery shards—provide much of what we know about ancient diet and lifestyle.

**2** In 500 B.C. Athens created the first municipal dump, requiring trash to be disposed of at least a mile from city walls.

**3** Today Americans generate 472 billion pounds of trash every year, including 96 billion pounds of food—more than 300 pounds per person.

**4** And that's only about 2 percent of the total waste stream. The rest is industrial refuse, including mine tailings, agricultural waste, construction debris, and exotics like "pickle liquor," an acid solution used to clean steel.

**5** No, you're not less of a man if you let a garage do the work: One quart of motor oil, improperly disposed of, can pollute 250,000 gallons of drinking water.

**6** Each year, consumers in the United States spread 300 million pounds of chemical insecticides, including compounds that the EPA says may impair the nervous system, disrupt hormones in the body, or cause cancer.

**7** Yet people worry about MSG in Chinese food.

**8** Well, the words *are* confusing: A. J. Weberman writes in his memoir that Bob Dylan once chased him down the street and smashed his head on the pavement after catching the self-professed "garbologist" rummaging through his trash, seeking clues to his song lyrics.

**9** Weberman went on to found the National Institute of Garbology and claimed to have excavated telltale trash from Neil Simon (bagel scraps and ants), Gloria Vanderbilt (an empty prescription medication bottle), and Norman Mailer (betting slips).

**10** In 1986 a fan at a Steve Winwood concert flicked a cigarette lighter and exploded methane leaking from the landfill underneath Shoreline Amphitheatre.

**11** Landfills are actually the No. 1 human-generated source of methane, belching 7 million tons into the atmosphere each year.

**12** Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island in New York, which closed in 2001, is the world's largest city dump. Covering about 2,200 acres, it is one of 1,767 landfills in the United States.

**13** *Sure* it was an accident: In 1996 there were three deaths at a transfer and recycling center in Brooklyn.

**14** Three years later, a severed human head showed up on a conveyor belt at the same facility.

**15** British inventor Peter Durand patented the tin can in 1810.

**16** A little late, buddy: Ezra Warner of Connecticut patented the first can opener in 1858. Americans throw away about 50 billion aluminum cans each year. If you dug up all the cans discarded in the past 30 years, they'd be worth nearly \$20 billion.

**17** Americans receive roughly 100 billion pieces of junk mail each year.

**18** They don't have to: Call 888-5-OPTOUT to get your name removed from some junk mail lists.

**19** In 2002 marine researcher Charles Moore surveyed 500 square miles of the North Pacific and found 10 pounds of floating plastic for every pound of living plankton in the water.

**20** But we're not the only ones making a mess: Pack rats generate mounds made of sticks, plant fragments, dung, and rocks, cemented together with their own urine. These rodent trash heaps can last up to 40,000 years.

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