

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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We Are Continuing to Waste Too Much Food

In a recent article, I mentioned that we are depleting the natural resources generated by the earth much faster than they are regenerated. In fact, we are consuming in one year 60% more than what is generated. Part of this over-consumption is due to waste, including the waste of food. Actually, for food it is a combination of loss and waste in the supply chain from farms, to processing plants, marketplaces, retailers, food-service operations, and our collective kitchens. *Waste* usually occurs toward the back end of the food chain, at the retail and consumer level. In general, the richer the nation, the higher is its per capita rate of waste. *Loss*, on the other hand, mostly occurs at the front of the food chain—during production, postharvest, and processing—and it's far less prevalent in industrialized nations than in the poorer countries. The developing countries tend to lack the infrastructure to deliver all of its food to consumers in time and in decent shape.

There are a number of reasons why we waste food. One of the big reasons is the labels on the food product, such as “sell by”, “use by” and “expiration”. We store food improperly; we take “use by” dates literally, though such stamps were designed to communicate peak freshness and have nothing to do with food safety. We also tend to overbuy because relatively cheap and nicely packaged food is so available that it is hard to pass up. We forget to eat our leftovers, we leave our doggy bags in restaurants, and we suffer little or no consequence for scraping edible food into a bin. Many people are not aware that food waste can cause harm to the environment. When food waste is sent to a landfill rather than used as compost, it will eventually decompose and convert to methane, a gas that is over 22 times more detrimental to climate change than carbon dioxide.

Food is also wasted at restaurants that serve overly large portions or set up extra large buffets, and the diners then take much more food than they will consume with the balance being wasted. Then of course, the unsold food at the restaurant becomes waste even if it was out for only a few minutes.

In the supermarkets, the store managers typically order more product than they really expect to sell for fear of running out and losing regular customers. It is not unusual for certain good produce to be dumped to make room for a new shipment. Fortunately, there are now today certain stores that will accept the “out of date” food product and sell it at a reduced price in a poverty neighborhood, but making sure that it is still safe to sell.

The first step in reducing food waste is to bring awareness and acceptance that it is a problem. Fortunately, there is innovation in the horizon to reduce the waste of food. Walmart, for example, is piloting a new program to laser etch product information on the eggs it sells to allow for replacing a cracked egg with one of equal age. In the past, Walmart would throw out an entire carton of eggs if only one was cracked. The National Resources Defense Council

(NRDC) is urging the government to standardize the confusion of the “sell by”, “best by” and “use by” dates, which leads to unnecessarily discarding food from the refrigerator. In addition, scholars and academics are lobbying schools to resurrect home economics classes so young students can embrace oddly shaped produce, store food properly, preserve leftover food, request smaller portions in restaurants, eat leftovers, share food with others in a restaurant, and compost everything else.

At the farm level, one approach is to separate the cosmetically challenged produce from the ideal produce and ship it to food banks. Grocery stores should discount the food that is approaching the expiration date so as to sell it rather than waste it. This will also allow the grocer to be more cognizant of order quantities. At the consumer level, one restaurant chain has been dismayed by the amount of food their customers waste, so it now offers smaller portions. By removing trays from their cafeterias, scores of U.S. colleges have cut by 25 to 30 percent the amount of food that students take, and waste. How would you accept a surcharge for leaving food on your plate before leaving a restaurant? Some restaurants have experimented with this policy in order to ban diners for leaving food on their plate. Whatever it takes, we need to reduce the amount of food that is wasted.