

Zentsuji Resource Recycling Program

“Take care of the Earth,
It was not given to us by our parents,
But borrowed from our children.”
African proverb

Zentsuji is a city of 35,000 people in Kagawa Prefecture on Shikoku Island, Japan. Essentially a rural area, it is rapidly becoming urbanized. Despite its small size, Zentsuji is at the forefront of efforts in conservation.

Twenty-five years ago, the mayor of Zentsuji was appalled by the amount of garbage being dumped into the landfill each day. He noticed, too, that there were some subtle signs of environmental changes. The streams that were once teeming with fish and shellfish now contained almost no creatures. The temperature was 2-3 degrees warmer, and no snow had fallen during winter for many years. An insect previously found only in the tropics had begun to infest parts of the city. Rather than securing yet another site for a landfill, the mayor proposed a Resource Recycling Program to help address the problem of waste management. He organized the program into those activities and functions that were citizen responsibilities and those that were city government responsibilities. The citizens were asked to help gather and sort materials that could be recycled, while the city educated its citizens, collected the sorted materials, and found businesses that could buy the recyclable waste for remanufacturing into other products.

Each household in Zentsuji is required to segregate its trash into 3 major categories: burnable, non-burnable and recyclables. The burnable trash includes wood and food scraps and is picked up twice a week and taken to an incinerator for burning. Once a month, the non-burnable trash which includes broken glass, concrete and other construction materials, is taken directly to a landfill.

The recyclable materials are further subdivided into glass, metals, plastics, paper, and fabric. Each type of recyclable is placed in separate color coded plastic bags which residents must purchase from the city. Each Saturday residents drop off their bags at one of 8 designated collection sites where similar materials are more finely sorted into 23 categories. The sites are manned by members of the community who rotate this responsibility. City trucks take the sorted recyclables to a central processing plant where they are prepared for shipping to recycling companies.

The Zentsuji Recycle Center consists of 2 buildings, a large parking lot and a grassy park area. One building is a processing facility where recyclables are brought to be compacted and bundled for shipping. The second building is an education center. On the top floor, there is a large meeting room and a thrift

shop where reusable items recovered from sorting are resold. Downstairs there are separate rooms where classes are conducted free of charge each month, encouraging reuse of various discards such as bicycle parts, scrap paper, cooking oil and clothing. There are workshops for bicycle repair, paper making and paper crafts, candle making, and fabric crafts and rag weaving.

The city of Zentsuji is divided into 8 communities, each with its own designated collection site. When the city sells its recyclable materials, it returns the profits proportionately to the 8 communities. During 2002, these communities shared 13 million yen from the 3,000 tons of recyclables they collected. Each community decides how they will spend their monies.

Zentsuji was one of the first Japanese cities to mandate segregated trash and recycling and is today a recognized national and international model. While there was some initial resistance to this program, a concerted public education effort helped to overcome negativity. Continued emphasis in the public schools also assures a strong foundation of support in future generations. Meanwhile, the national and other local governments have also implemented various environmental awareness and recycling plans, underscoring the importance of such activities for the greater good of the society and the world. After 25 years, citizens of Zentsuji see recycling not as a forced obligation, but as a responsibility. Recycling has become an accepted part of everyday living.

Reflections

The Zentsuji effort is successful because citizens are convinced of its intelligence and accept responsibility for their share of the work, and because the local government established the infrastructure for making reuse and recycling practical and profitable. Such a shared vision and cooperative effort is needed right now in Hawaii. No less than Zentsuji, Honolulu, and all other counties, cannot afford to dedicate precious space for landfills, nor risk the long term hazardous effects of buried trash. In our very isolated geographic location, we have an opportunity to build an infrastructure that makes the recycling loop complete; support industries and technologies in reuse and recycling; and serve as a model of effective environmental practices for other communities in the world, all while preserving our own beautiful aina. With clear purpose, commitment, and the benefit of others' experiences, we can make this a reality. We must, or as the African proverb reminds us, we will rob our children of their future.

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