

Serendipity: Trash and Treasure

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The switch to digital television brings with it a huge environmental challenge.

Just how valid is the expression that one man's trash is another's treasure? It works pretty well in nature. I strategically place the lint from my dryer on the deck, and have spied it stitched into birds' nests. Less picturesquely, I see it on trails and sidewalks, where insects feast on scat. But whose treasure is the ubiquitous trash created by the electronic age: the so-called "e-waste"?

With the switchover to digital hi-definition television, 25 million out-of-service but functioning televisions highlight this issue. Imagine these surplus TVs added to what the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) estimated was 2005's e-waste: 1.5 million-1.9 million tons of computers (30 million), TVs, VCRs, monitors, cell phones (98 million) and other electronic gizmos.



In a perfect world, used electronics would be worth the cost of breaking them down, including safely sequestering the trash's trash. This works to an extent. For the last couple of decades, developing countries like [China](#) reaped the benefits and bore the costs of our noxious exports. As a result, parts of rural China that may never have seen a working computer register the highest levels of dioxin poisoning in the world. Thailand, India, Ghana — wherever are the poorest of the poor — have become more recent repositories.

Chris Carroll describes a typical scene in [Ghana](#) in January's issue of [National Geographic](#): destitute "entrepreneurs" burning flame-retardant insulation from copper wires using old tires for fuel, releasing a panoply of toxins. Molten lead, a neurotoxin, is processed in dishes that later hold the family's dinner. Broken TV tubes strewn

across villages with no electricity yield lead as well as cadmium, a carcinogen to lungs and kidneys. Rain washes the toxic litter to rivers and seas.

The 1995 “Basel Ban,” part of the [Basel Convention](#), forbade hazardous waste shipments to poor countries. The United States was one of only three countries (along with [Haiti](#) and [Afghanistan](#)) not to ratify the ban, although some states like California have instituted their own laws. Jim Puckett, head of [Basel Action Network](#), argues, “We in the developed world get the benefit from these devices, but when our equipment becomes unusable, we externalize the real environmental costs and liabilities to the developing world.”

Unsure of where your toxic trash might end up, consumers are tempted to store the stuff in their garages. But even that has indirect effects on the environment: recycling the gold, silver and other valuable in electronics is more efficient and environmentally safe than mining new metals.

Santa Barbarans can pat themselves on the back for a relatively well-oiled system. Leslie Robinson, program specialist for [Santa Barbara County Public Works Department-Resource Recovery and Waste Management Division](#), says the county contracts directly with a Fresno-based recycler. County officials personally visit the facility to assure the materials are being processed according to the best available methods. “They have a factory which breaks down the insides and reuses parts. Nothing is shipped out of the county,” says Robinson.

Lest we feel squeaky-clean, it’s worth pointing out that we’re already reaping China’s “treasure.” According to Carroll, Jeffrey Weidenhamer, a chemist at [Ashland University](#), had his class test inexpensive jewelry from China. The pieces contained high amounts of lead.

“China is the world’s major manufacturing center,” explained Weidenhamer. “It’s not all that surprising things are coming full circle and now we’re getting contaminated products back.”

The county’s collection site is located on Calle Real near El Sueno Road. It is open 7 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Saturday. [Click here](#) for more information or call 805.882.3602.

Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.