

# village view

by Andrea Leonard

If you think the country's in worse shape than ever, and nothing's improving, and can't see a ray of hope for the future — cheer up! It's not quite that bad.

A certain amount of progress is being made. Maybe not a lot, but looking back five or ten years, we are better off now than we were then.

Our air is cleaner. It's not yet back to where it was before the invention of the gasoline engine, but pollution control devices on automobiles and precipitators on industrial smokestacks have made a difference.

Our water is cleaner. Rivers aren't yet teeming with spawning fish each spring, but efforts to clean them up, and stop dumping raw sewage and pollutants in rivers and streams are giving them a chance to flush themselves, and the fish a chance to come back.

Our oceans are starting to spew back at us, along our beaches, some of the offal we've been carting out to sea for disposal; this is resulting in greater effects to complete some sewage treatment plants in and around major ports.

People are reacting to environmentalists' entreaties, especially now since they've been turned back on hot days from polluted waters and beaches covered with sludge.

More and more recycling progress is seen; in this area, too, more and more Americans are recognizing the need.

At New York City's American Museum of Natural History, in cooperation with the National Association of Recycling Industries, the "Recycling America's Resources" exhibit has opened this summer.

Tracing the history of recycling in this country since Colonial days, the exhibit illustrates the important role scrap processors and industrial waste consumers play in solving our resource conservation and environmental problems.

The exhibit demonstrates how our wastes mount while our resources diminish, and how we're running out of many vital metals at the same time we throw those very same metals away, bury or burn them. The problem of solid waste disposal isn't limited to Barnstabletown. It's nationwide and will continue to grow more serious.

Americans generate — each day — 145 million tons of solid waste. By 1990 this figure is expected to top 225 million tons. Costs of disposal, at the current rate of increase, will double.

Progress is turning such wasteful practices around, recycling for significant savings, and how much more could be saved, is exhibited.

In 1975 we recycled 820,000 tons of lead. Potential exists for saving one million tons more — enough to make 80 million auto batteries.

Last year we recycled one million tons of aluminum. Another million and a half tons is now thrown away. If recycled, aluminum we now waste would build 18,700 jumbo jets.

We recycled a million tons of copper and brass last year. We could recycle 2 million tons more, if we would. That's enough to replace all the household plumbing in the United States seven times.

We recycled 36 million tons of iron. We threw out 120 million tons more. Saved, it could have built 80 million cars.

Last year we recycled 9 million tons of paper. We could save 765 million trees if we recycled 45 million more tons now wasted.

We recycled 820 tons of textiles, but threw away 4.4 million tons that could have been used to make clothing, blankets or vulcanized products.

Continued public support is necessary to maintain recycling programs. Only if each one of us does everything possible as an individual will metals, paper and textiles be reprocessed.

By the end of this century, at the current rate of increased use, many of our minerals will be virtually depleted; we'll be dependent on overseas sources for more than half our basic metals.

Despite modern tree harvesting techniques, within twenty years there may not be enough to meet our growing demands for paper products.

Even the Federal government is starting to respond to the need to reverse the trend to massive waste. Early in July, 1976, the United States General Accounting Office called upon Congress for federal leadership in stimulating nationwide recycling.

Congress can provide that stimulus and help create a consistent demand for recycled materials. Since the government consumes tremendous quantities of paper, giving recycled materials priority in government purchasing practices would make significant savings.

Two major federal procurement agencies, the General Services Administration and the Department of Defense, have announced programs to initiate purchase of recycled materials. Still uncommitted to recycling and using recycled materials are a couple of hundred other federal agencies. It is slow.

Congress can also pass corrective legislation to eliminate present discriminatory freight rates imposed on recycled materials, and taxes that favor virgin material usage over recycled materials. Congress can change regulations that now prohibit federal procurement of products containing recycled materials.

State and municipal governments, industry and public agencies often emulate federal purchasing policies; it's hoped the example will be followed by other agencies.

Leadership at all levels of government has been lacking. It's absurd that environmentalists have urged recycling for years, but only very recently has the federal government recognized the double advantages involved. Elimination of waste products we don't know what to do with and creation of new ones from stuff we used to throw away — ridiculously simple!

No one of us can change anything "all by himself"; in spite of the long delay in government response, however, we're not "all alone"!

In little villages like ours, in middle-sized towns like ours, in small cities like some we could drive to in a couple of hours, and in big cities within a day's travel time, thousands of people — just like us — are recycling.

It hasn't been great leadership at state and federal levels that's made possible recycling 820 tons of lead, a million tons of aluminum, 144,000 tons of steel, a million tons of copper and brass, 36 million tons of iron, 9 million tons of paper, and 820 tons of textiles.

No, the impetus came from people, ordinary Americans, who've had the common sense to see the obvious and who've been willing to take the initiative and do what's necessary, because that's what's sensible.

It has come from the people, from the grassroots of the nation. It's the sort of response that makes us a strong and surviving country, even when the government is run absurdly.

I'm never going to stop pushing for recycling. It's what makes America, America. Not perfect, perhaps; but the best place there is.