

A I've read that e-waste is growing and the need for effective recycling is a serious issue.

B Yes, the explosive growth of the electronics industry has led to a rapidly escalating issue of end-of-life electronics, or e-waste. There's a long list: computer equipment, stereos, televisions, mobile phones...

A Where does my old computer end up after I give it in for recycling?

B It ends up in a landfill, like the majority of electronic products unfortunately, but not always on the US territory.

A I thought there was legislation in the US about electronics recycling.

B Twenty-five states in the US covering sixty-five per cent of the population have mandated electronics recycling. At the federal level, an Act was introduced in 2011 prohibiting the export of e-waste.

A Do you mean that e-waste generated in the US is exported?

B Yes. The watchdog found that suburban Hong Kong has apparently become the new favourite dumping site for exported American e-waste.

A So Hong Kong suburbs could be the resting place of my old PC?

B Exactly, in the suburbs of one of the world's most sophisticated financial capitals. Twenty kilometres from Hong Kong's packed centre there are the New Territories, soaring with new housing developments where three point six million people live and where as much as twenty per cent of all US electronic waste may be ending up.

A I suppose investigations have been made to find evidence?

B Yes. The Based Action Network, BAN for short, is a US based non-governmental organization. It focuses on protecting the world's environment from toxic materials and it's carried out an investigation. BAN used GPS trackers to follow two hundred and five pieces of discarded consumer electronics delivered to recyclers across the US. BAN says sixty-nine were exported, and sixty-six of those left the US in a possibly illicit fashion.

A So they were exported illegally? In spite of the 2011 federal Act you mentioned? And isn't there an international agreement or something?

B Yes, there is, its name is the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal. It's an international treaty designed to reduce the movements of hazardous waste between nations. The US, like ten other member nations of the UN, isn't party to the convention, but the e-waste exported from the US is an illegal import in their destinations which have all ratified the convention. The environmental watchdog thinks that as many as forty-three shipping containers of e-waste could be leaving American shores illegally every day.

A I suppose this practice of illegal offshoring of electronics destined for recycling has everything to do with money.

B For sure. Recycling electronic goods, which contain toxic and hazardous chemicals, requires considerable manual labour and is extremely expensive to do properly.

A So recyclers can make more profit from selling monitors and computers to brokers instead of trying to dismantle them correctly themselves.

B Exactly. One certified recycler in Seattle sent e-waste to countries where importing US e-waste is illegal. It was fined nearly four hundred and fifty thousand dollars by the Washington State Department of Ecology for illegally exporting flat screens and monitors containing hazardous materials. In fact, some recyclers don't even know the eventual destination of the e-waste they handle.

A You mean they've got no means of checking where their e-waste goes?

B One printer dropped off by BAN with a recycler in Massachusetts ended up with another recycler in Vermont, was then shipped to the Chicago area, and finally ended up in an e-waste junkyard in the New Territories.

A But if an NGO can track waste to its final location, can't Hong Kong and the US work together and intercept shipping?

B We know that the final location for half of all exported items is in the suburbs of Hong Kong. And the problem will last as long as products are designed in a way which makes it difficult to re-use, repair, or recycle them.

Outline

The explosive growth of the electronics industry has led to a rapidly escalating issue of e-waste. Most electronic products end up in a landfill. Recycling electronic goods, which contain toxic and hazardous chemicals, requires considerable manual labour and is extremely expensive to do properly, which means that recyclers can make more profit by selling monitors and computers to brokers instead of dismantling them themselves. The environmental watchdog thinks that as many as forty-three shipping containers of e-waste could be illegally leaving American shores every day. The problem will last as long as products are designed in a way which makes it difficult to re-use, repair, or recycle them.

Questions

1. How do you dispose your old electronics?
2. Are there measures to help you and advise you how to recycle?
3. Should recycling of e-waste be financed by the users of electronic equipment?
4. How could we ensure that recycling of waste is done in a way that respects the environment?