



## The Coffee Cup Conundrum

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In this rainy city of ours, coffee plays an integral role in the daily routine of most Vancouverites. Not only does it give us an extra jolt in the morning, it brings us together and enriches our senses. It is not surprising then that Vancouver provides more than its fair share of the 1.6 billion coffee cups that end up in Canadian landfills every year. Some estimates have coffee cups comprising as much as 3.5% of Metro Vancouver's waste. These cups are waste from top to bottom. The good news is that solutions already exist.

Those coffee cups that are such a familiar sight are not fit for the recycling bins in our city. The cup is a mixture of paper and boxboard, which would be recyclable if it weren't for the poly-ethylene coating that each cup is sprayed with. The same goes for milk cartons, which are sprayed on the interior and exterior, making them equally unrecyclable. Metro Vancouver chooses not to recycle the cups because the process is expensive and the byproduct cannot be remade into paper. Recycled coffee cups usually end up as a conglomerate of materials used to make things like park benches, which in effect prohibits the material from any further recycling. Regular paper can be recycled 7 times over before the fibers become too short to bind together.

The plastic lids are no better in this regard. They are made from polystyrene plastic (#6 recycling code), which is not accepted in Vancouver's blue bins. Even where polystyrene is accepted as recyclable, it experiences downcycling-degradation, or it is simply thrown in the furnace and incinerated.

In 2008, Toronto City Council was pushing for a complete ban on disposable coffee cups. The ban never did materialize, but actions such as this have brought the issue to the forefront. There have been small signs from industry that they are finally acknowledging this needless waste. For example, Tim Horton's has set up a few in-store cup recycling bins within Metro Vancouver. Although it's an improvement, the fact that it's only available within the store essentially defeats the purpose, because most of the coffee products are consumed elsewhere. The in-store recycling is also made redundant by the availability of ceramic mugs. If you take the cup out of the store it becomes waste, if you opt to use the in-store recycling, you're actually downcycling and not utilizing the reusable mug available. Either way it's a travesty.

The most obvious solutions available are using the mugs provided, or that travel mug that's been collecting dust on your kitchen shelf. This begs the question, why haven't these

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practices become the norm? There are a few incentives to using your own mug such as a small discount of 10 cents (which happens to be the cost of the disposable cup). However this has not proven to be an effective measure. There exists an alternative in PLA cups, which are comprised of plant sugars and polymer. This allows them to be composted, but thus far they have been shunned by industry because of their inability to withstand the heat of an average coffee product. Although these eco-friendly cups are a positive development, they constitute a new generation of waste.

Coffee cups have evolved from being really bad, to being less bad. Originally we used plastics that leached toxins into our drink (PVC), presently we use a durable plastic that does not break down naturally (PE), and perhaps in the not too distant future we'll be using a plastic mixed with plant sugar that will eventually compost (Bio-polymer). We need to adopt these new technologies, but even more importantly we need to change our behavior. The only proven way to do this is by putting away the carrot and breaking out the stick. We need to be charged the true cost of our waste when we buy our coffee and accompanying plastic. Plastic bag use has been shown to drop by as much as 95% (Ireland's figure) when people are charged a premium for their waste. Vancouver has a duty as the coffee capital of Canada to

take leadership in tackling this conundrum.

So what to do about our current situation? As in most environmental issues, the biggest determinant is human behaviour. A shift in thinking does not happen over night but it does require a relentless effort from all fronts if it is to take place. Before we arrive at a situation where the coffee shops can charge a deposit for the waste they create the consumer must know the effect of their actions. Incentives must be given, notices must be posted, customers must be encouraged and the wasteful ways must be changed. We won't all be able to pack our travel mugs or enjoy our coffee while lounging in the café right away. However, the sooner we find out the changes we can make, the sooner the industry will feel the pressure and accommodate those changes. It's time to be better, instead of being less bad.

