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Trash talk

A bulldozer shifts garbage at a California landfill.

The average American produces 102 tons of garbage in a lifetime. Edward Humes thinks that's plenty.

BY MAGGIE TARANAWA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Of all the things to study, why study trash? The late William Rathje, archeologist and founder of the Garbage Project, probably heard a similar question many times in his career. Using a bucket auger to take core samples of landfills, Rathje and his team unearthed decades of waste that would have otherwise never seen the light of day.

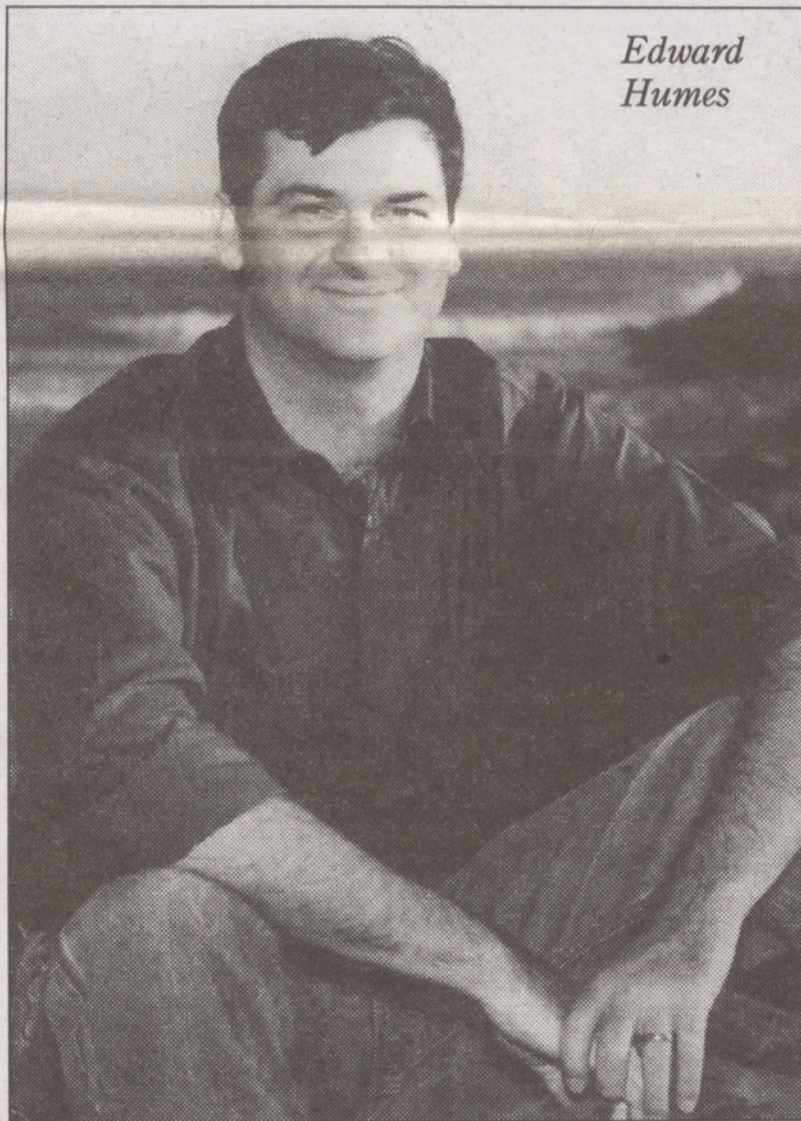
Rathje's Garbage Project also unearthed new knowledge about what happens to trash once it's tossed, what you can determine about a person just by studying his or her trash, and how good we are at fooling ourselves about how much healthy food we eat (our refuse tells the true story).

Author Edward Humes has been studying garbage, too. His new book, "Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash" (Avery, \$27), shows us mind-bogglingly huge landfills, sobering statistics (the average American is slated to produce 102 tons of trash in his or her lifetime) and concrete solutions to our collective wastefulness.

Both Humes and Rathje would probably agree: Getting to know our trash better, and understanding where it goes once we toss it, might be key to making less of it.

Maggie Taranawa: In your book "Garbology," you mention how the Environmental Protection Agency has underestimated the amount of trash that Americans produce. Some 140 million tons go unaccounted for in its calculations. Why do you think this is, and where did you find more accurate statistics?

Edward Humes: The reason for the underestimation is the method the EPA uses to generate a figure for our municipal waste in the



Edward Humes

United States. It's not by actually measuring the amount of trash coming in. It's a more indirect method called "indirect flow analysis." They get data from manufacturers about how much material they're making that goes out to consumers. Then, through various byzantine calculations, they come up with a figure of how much trash is theoretically being made.

They came up with this method decades ago, when there were many more dumps (legal and illegal) and no one was measuring how much was going into them. The current method was the best they could come up with, and they've stuck with it

ever since. The problem is, we have far fewer dumps now, and these dumps are meticulous about measuring how much garbage they take in. Their business model requires that they charge by the ton. There are scales when the trucks enter and leave, and they compare the weight of the full and empty trucks so they know exactly how much has been dumped. Because of this we have very good data.

Columbia University recently partnered with a trade journal called "BioCycle," and they started doing these biannual "State of Garbage in America" reports that actually use the real data. They found the missing trash! We're throwing away a lot more than the EPA estimates. We're also recycling much less. We're sending about twice as much garbage to the dump as the EPA suggests.

M.T.: In centuries past, methods such as piggeries (in which trash was fed to pigs) and incineration were common methods of waste disposal. When and why did landfills become the way to dispose of trash?

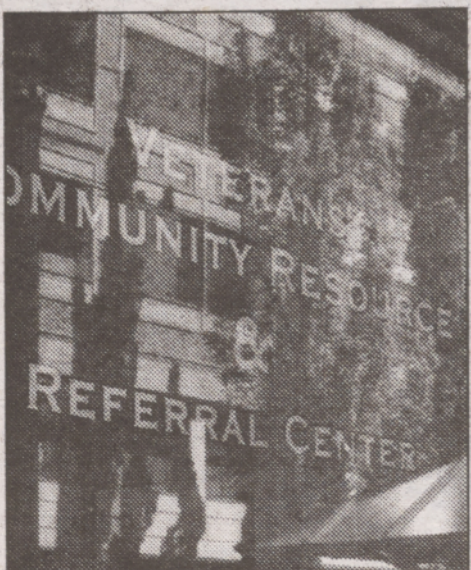
E.H.: The first landfill and anti-litter campaign was in ancient Greece about 2,500 years ago. It's not a new idea. Shortly before World War II, some refinements were added. Specifically, the idea of a "sanitary landfill," where you cover the waste with dirt every day to suppress the odor and vermin. It's been further refined since the 1980s and early 1990s by placing plastic liners underneath to prevent the seepage of toxic waste into groundwater supplies.

Of course, this was a big improvement over throwing garbage just anywhere. Cities were a mess for centuries. People would just hurl trash out their windows into the street or alleys. New York City

Last year, Portland reinforced its reputation as a leader in recycle and reuse efforts by banning most plastic grocery store bags. (Bags for produce, meat and bulk food are still allowed.) Seattle adopted a similar ban that went into effect just last month. A statewide proposal failed in the recent Oregon Legislature. The city of Portland has a declared goal of raising the recycling rate to 75 percent by 2015. With steps such as reducing curbside pick-ups, consolidating compost waste and creating a system for food scraps, the city has reduced its garbage stream by more than 40 percent, according to the city.

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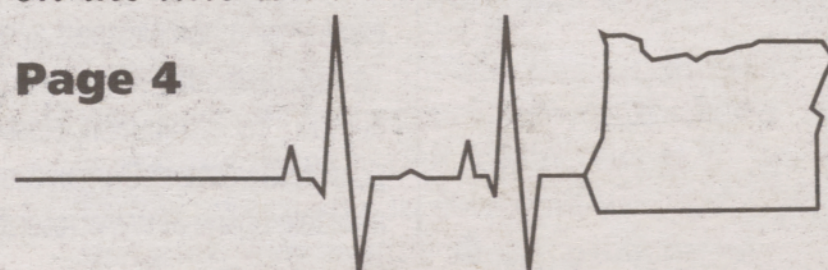
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