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Title: Going Beyond Blue and Grey

Subtitle: How Germany is a national role model when it comes to the environment

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Photo: Recycling.jpg

Caption: Brown, Red, Green, White are just some of the recycling colours in Germany. The trick is: what goes where?

The characterization of Germans as logical and systematic people is a fairly accurate stereotype that carries right down to their recycling bins.

Forget about the simple “blue” and “grey” recycling: Germany has an elaborate system of recycling, since nearly everything can be recycled. Each item has its specific colour-coded bin—one for brown glass, one for green glass, one for clear glass, paper, packaging, organic waste, metal—and finally, a last one for whatever (if anything) was left over. Plastics can be deposited into yellow sacks which are picked up on the streets during the appropriate days. Some cities like Munich have skips for paper, glass, metal and packaging as an alternative to the yellow sacks.

Recycling isn’t merely a household chore; it’s a national mindset. To help natives with this ‘national pastime’ of recycling, supermarkets tend to have a door-side recycling area. Local shopping malls sometimes have battery disposal areas. Stores also provide the option for patrons to leave packaging material in the store rather than taking home the materials—after all, it’s the sandwich, not the packaging, which is being bought.

To tackle business manufacturers, Germany created the Green Dot system where manufacturers and retailers are required to pay for a Green Dot on their packaging. The more product packaging, the higher the fees. This has created the incentive for businesses to use thinner glass and less packaging for consumer products, which in turn helps reduce the amount of garbage produced.

Stores also add additional deposit fees on returnable bottled drinks, but these fees can be reclaimed once the bottle is returned. For glass that cannot be reused, street sides have bottle banks, with, of course, the corresponding bins for brown, green and clear glass.

Nevertheless, the wasteful Canadian may scoff “Rubbish!” at all these minute details and proceed to chuck whatever into the leftover ‘grey’ bin.

But be forewarned—the recycling regulations are mandatory. There are large fines in Germany, and as impossible as it may seem to the un-environmental North American, there are recycling police who will take notice of any apartment’s un-environmental behaviour. Since they cannot tell whose garbage is whose, the fines will be charged not only on the ignorant individual, but to the entire complex. Improper recycling has obvious social implications for the errant recycler.

Regulations are strict. While the exchange student in Germany may find closed stores on Sundays inconvenient, street recycling receptacles are also marked with times they may be used. One may not use them on Sundays and at night, and occasionally during lunchtime and Saturday afternoons.

But don't be quick to assume that Germans are simply fussier with their recycling than Canadians. Being wasteful in Germany is not only socially frowned upon, but is discouraged through its costs. Gas is expensive and costs more than one Euro per litre due to government taxes. Electricity, water, and other utilities all come with high price tags.

Due to the initiatives by the German Green Party, environmentalism has become a major part of German politics.

Last January, the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats agreed to phase out the government subsidies to the coal mining industry. It is expected that by 2018, the annual 2.5 billion euros subsidy will end, where the money will now be used towards miners' pensions and environmental clean-ups in the mines, mainly concentrated in northwestern Germany.

While still 60% of Germany's electricity is still generated by fossil fuels, there is a growing movement toward non-hydro renewable energy. Germany is the world's leading generator of electricity from wind, equipped with more than 17,500 wind turbines. It is also gradually phasing out nuclear power generation in the next two decades.

In North America, being environmentally minded is seen an option, and is often associated with negative connotations such as being 'tree-huggers'. Recycling is optional. Conservation is seen as a chore. Packaging is seen as a way to sell a product, and not as a useless waste that is dilapidating our environment.

However, in Germany sustainability is embedded in everyday life. It is part of their commitment to expound how one entire nation can conserve efficiently and economically. Germany does not simply pay lip-service to the notion of working to a sustainable world—it compartmentalizes, sorts, and implements these seemingly impossible goals into truly admirable action.