

My Zero Waste Journey in the Southern Highlands

When my husband & I were living in North West Sydney we would be filling up a 120L “red” landfill bin every week, and a 240L “yellow” recycling bin every 2 weeks. Today, we live in the Southern Highlands and we no longer have the need for garbage or recycling collection.

How did we do it? And why?

The Benefits

First, I'd like to talk about some of the benefits of quitting single-use plastics and becoming more conscious of my waste footprint – because I think there's a view that waste reduction is all about deprivation. I'm a lot healthier now, eating whole unpackaged food that is home-cooked, I'm more creative & resourceful, looking to reuse or repair what I already have, before throwing it out or buying new, plus I'm more fulfilled and connected to the community I live in, and our beautiful Southern Highlands natural environment, through the people I have encountered at plastic-free events, beach clean ups, participating in wildlife regeneration schemes, and the conversations that arise from some of my less conventional, but gentler on the planet, practices. Anything that I've 'given up' because of its packaging or environmental impact, I either found I didn't want anymore or I've found a better alternative. There's literally no downside.

Where Do I Start?

The most important thing is not to be overwhelmed. If you want to make a difference, start with the 4 main single-use plastic polluters: plastic bags, plastic bottles, single-use coffee cups and plastic straws. If you eliminate 1 or more of these items from your life, you will already be making a massive difference. Taking a look in your bin, to find out what you most commonly throw out, is a great place to start too. Composting your veggie scraps will straightaway reduce your landfill bin by up to 80%. If you don't have room or time for composting, or conversely, if you have space for more veggie scraps in your own compost, then check out an app called ShareWaste.

What Do I Throw Away?

OK, so I'm not one of those people who can fit all my rubbish for 12 months into a tiny jar, and I think that image is unrealistic for most people and can make us feel that our efforts are for nothing. Between the two of us, and 2 cats, we have a small 1L container on the kitchen bench-top, for anything that cannot be composted or recycled. This container is emptied every 1-2 weeks. We have 2 boxes outside – one for recyclable cans, bottles and other containers, to go to the RRC and one for containers that qualify for Return & Earn. These boxes are emptied on average once a month. We have a collection of soft plastics for REDcycle and other items to go to Terracycle (toothpaste tubes, old cosmetics containers, PostPaks) below the sink. The soft plastics is dropped off at REDcycle about once a month, and the Terracycle collections take up to 12 months to fill up. By far, the majority of our household waste goes into our compost bin. The compost bin is emptied into our outside compost pile weekly. Any cardboard or paper is usually dealt with either by burning in our wood-burner fireplace (during Winter), or as sheet mulch in the garden, or shredded into our compost pile. What's left for our landfill container is odds and ends, like clothing tags and medicine blister packs.

So, What Did We Change?

Here's a summary of some of the changes in our kitchen & bathroom:

	Before	Now
Kitchen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paper Towels - Washing Up Liquid in a bottle - Chux cloths & synthetic scourers - Tea Bags - Bottled Water - Boxes of cereal with plastic liners - Spray & Wipe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rags - Bulk washing up liquid refilled into a bottle - Compostable cloths & scrubbers - Loose leaf tea, tea pot - Ceramic water filter/ reusable water bottle - Oats, seeds, nuts, fruit etc purchased loose or in bulk, or in largest available quantity - Repurposed spray bottle containing water, white vinegar, and essential oils
Bathroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Toilet paper in plastic - Shampoo and Conditioner bottles - Shower Gel bottles - Toothpaste - Toothbrush - Refillable plastic razor - Disposable tampons/ sanitary pads 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who Gives a Crap Toilet Paper wrapped in paper - Shampoo soap bar and Apple Cider Vinegar rinse - Natural handmade soaps - Homemade tooth powder - Bamboo toothbrush - Metal safety razor - Silicone Menstrual cup & reusable cloth pads

Nothing goes into our landfill container if we aren't certain it can't be *reused, repaired, composted or recycled*. If my husband isn't sure, there's a spot on our bench-top where he can leave the item!

In addition to the above, the majority of my new clothes in the past 12 months have been purchased second-hand, and anything that I haven't worn in the last 12 months has been donated. Worn out clothes are either mended, upcycled or become rags, as a last resort. We collect organic waste from 3 other families, via ShareWaste, to go into our compost pile (people who live in apartments & don't want their veggie scraps to end up in landfill). We use cloth or mesh bags when buying fruit and vegetables, always choosing either the loose unpackaged option (or least packaged option). Our cats' waste & litter goes into a dedicated compost bin, as it cannot be used in the veggie garden.

Isn't It Expensive to Live This Way?

Not at all, in fact, we spend less than we did before. The reason is that although some bulk items can be expensive versus the packaged equivalent, others are the same price or less, and although you might invest in a reusable coffee cup or safety razor, these are one-time expenses. There are massive savings to be had from buying clothes second hand, and reusing worn out clothes for cleaning rags. The biggest revelation for us was probably the safety razor. It cost around \$30 to buy initially, and the blades to refill it are unbelievably cheap - 50 for \$15! Not only that, but whereas the plastic refillable razors can only be refilled by their branded blades, safety razors are compatible with any brand of double edged blade. For ladies, reusable sanitary products represent a massive saving,

and believe it or not, once you get over your preconceptions, they are nicer and more comfortable than the disposables. I'm yet to hear of a woman who wants to go back!

How Much Difference Does One Person Really Make?

Well, stopping 250 coffee cups from going into landfill, or blowing from bins into the natural environment, per year, is just one consequence of removing as much single-use plastic as possible from your life. Every person who makes the switch to a reusable cup, water bottle, bag and straw, is going to influence other people around them to look at their own consumption habits. And how about the bag ban in Australian states? Straws banned in cities like Seattle? Plastic plates and cutlery banned in France? These initiatives didn't come about because governments and business suddenly decided to 'do the right thing', every citizen influences government policy with their voting power, and every consumer influences business by voting with their dollars! There has been a huge grassroots movement involving many activists in recent years, which along with scientific research, and videos of the impact on sea life, remote beaches littered with other countries junk, and sea birds feeding bottle tops to their chicks, has led to the changes we are seeing worldwide today. I know because I've been involved in some of the activism. So yes, you can make a difference.

Where to Go for More Information?

Check out Recycling Near You, REDcycle, Terracycle Australia and ShareWaste online to learn more. On Facebook and Instagram there are a wide range of zero waste and plastic free groups, where members are always happy to share advice and inspiration. I have a Facebook page called A Simpler Life in the Southern Highlands; it is a place where you can find tips and inspiration for reducing your waste!

Other great things to do are: join your local Boomerang Bags or volunteer at your local community garden. These people in my experience are passionate about making our community a more sustainable place.