

What was the last thing you threw into a garbage can?

Can you even remember what it was? With the convenience of modern life, it is easy to take basic services like indoor plumbing and waste disposal for granted. We might know which day of the week the garbage truck passes, but do we ever think about where all that trash goes?

In nature, organisms called **detritivores** take care of trash by recycling it back into the ecosystem. Dead organisms are broken down into nutrients that can be reused by other organisms. **Scavengers** such as foxes, magpies, and vultures eat dead animals. When you're riding around and see them eating roadkill, they are actually helping to keep our environment clean and improving our soil. **Decomposers** such as fungi and worms can break down waste and make nutrients available to the ecosystem. Without nature's systems, nutrients would stay trapped inside dead organisms, and our world would be covered in garbage!



When we throw our trash away, most of it gets sent to landfills. You can find our local landfill on the outskirts of Cody on the Meeteetse Highway. Landfills are specially designed sites that can hold our waste without contaminating the land and water nearby. Trash is compacted in huge piles, and dirt is dumped on top to reduce stinky smells and pest problems. Landfills across the world are growing every single day. Americans throw away about 4.9 pounds of garbage a day per person, adding up to almost 1800 pounds per year. When we are more mindful about what we throw away, we can reduce what we contribute to landfills.

Are landfills the only place our wastes can end up? Absolutely not! There are many alternatives to just sending all your trash to the landfill.

Recycling diverts waste from landfills to be reused. Metals, some plastics, and glass can be melted down and used to make new products. Paper can be chopped up and reused to make more paper. Reusing our trash means that fewer natural resources need to be used to create the things we use every day.

Junior Conservationist Zone: Winter 2025

Here in Cody, our recycling center only accepts the following:

- [Aluminum cans](#) (beverage cans)
- Tin cans (magnetic; generally food cans)
- Corrugated cardboard
- Magazines and catalogs
- Newspaper
- Phone books
- [#1 plastics](#)
- [#2 plastics](#)
- Office paper (light-colored paper, envelopes)



We need to pay attention when recycling to make sure what we throw out actually gets recycled! Throwing food or other non-recyclable trash can contaminate the whole recycling bin and doom everything to the landfill. At our local recycling center, you need to sort the different types of trash and place them in separate bins.

Composting is another fantastic way to keep trash out of landfills! Composting allows our waste to be broken down the way it would in a natural environment. We can compost our food, yard waste, and some paper products. The process of composting allows trash to decompose and transform into healthy soil. We can use compost in our gardens to grow plants.















Upcycling and thrifting can also keep waste out of landfills. Turning an old t-shirt into a cleaning rag, making art out of discarded wood, or using an old bathtub as a planter would all be great examples of upcycling. Thrift stores sell people's old belongings to others who would be happy to give them a new home. Buying something secondhand at a thrift store is a great way to save money and reduce the natural resources used to create new products.

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Activity:

Draw arrows from each item in column 1 to the best place to dispose of it in column 2, then draw an arrow from each destination to what it could become in column 3.

<p>1.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 15px; background-color: #d4edda; padding: 10px;"> <p style="text-align: center;">banana peel</p> <div style="text-align: center;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;">soda can</p> <div style="text-align: center;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;">old toothbrush</p> <div style="text-align: center;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;">hoodie</p> <div style="text-align: center;"></div> </div>	<p>2.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 15px; background-color: #fff3cd; padding: 10px;"> <p style="text-align: center;">landfill</p> <div style="text-align: center;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;">thrift store</p> <div style="text-align: center;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;">recycling center</p> <div style="text-align: center;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;">composter</p> <div style="text-align: center;"></div> </div>	<p>3.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 15px; background-color: #ffe0b2; padding: 10px;"> <p style="text-align: center;">in someone else's closet</p> <div style="text-align: center;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;">compressed into cubes</p> <div style="text-align: center;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;">fresh compost</p> <div style="text-align: center;"></div> <p style="text-align: center;">new cans</p> <div style="text-align: center;"></div> </div>
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Learn more:

Books from the Children's Library:

I'm Trying to Love Garbage by Bethany Barton and *Recycling* by Don Nardo

Sources:

<https://environmentamerica.org/center/resources/trash-in-america-2/>

<https://biologydictionary.net/detritivore/>

<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/landfills/>