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## [Recycling Gone Bad: Where Does Our High Tech Waste Go?](#)

*Poor villages in China and other Third World countries buy it and get sick from it*

Where do our discarded computers, monitors, keyboards, inkjet cartridges, toner cartridges and printers go? Ideally, they should all be recycled and the materials should find their way back into the new products. However, what really happens is that about 80 percent of electronic waste gets exported to the Third World countries where it turns into an environmental nightmare. One such place importing electronic waste is Guiyu, China shown in this picture taken by Behring-Chishlom from Greenpeace. "Guiyu, China, literally takes my breath away," wrote Tricia Judge. "While standing in front of a pile of discarded toner cartridges nearly as tall as I am, I struggle with the smoke from a nearby melting operation. It burns my eyes and throat, making breathing laborious. Less than a hundred feet away, 'e-waste' is being burned, and a white, fog-like cloud of smoke envelops everything, limiting visibility." China has banned such imports, but the ban is not enforced. The residents of these poor towns have virtually no other means to support themselves and the Chinese government has no idea how to change the situation. It seems that these people are faced with a tragic choice between utter poverty and self-poisoning. Out of this "recycling" the average laborer gets about \$1.5 per day. As well as an entire host of health problems. "Heaps of empty cartridges line the streets and riversides after being scavenged only for their toner. Once the toner is swept out by fingers or paintbrushes, the cartridges are burned along with other e-waste materials or are discarded along the Lianjiang River," Judge reported. "This type of recycling and dumping practice has rendered local drinking water not potable; the river has 200 times acceptable levels of acid and 2,400 times acceptable levels of lead. Many residents have developed respiratory problems. A local school survey found that one out of 10 students had severe respiratory problems." "Why do recycling companies send the waste to such places instead of actually recycling it? The answer is simple: it is *much* cheaper. Sending a monitor to China costs about ten cents. Actually recycling it costs several dollars. And although electronics companies usually have various policies for promoting recycling, for example you might get a discount if you return the emptied printer cartridge, they rely on various recycling companies that sometimes just produce a "certificate of recycling" and dispose of the product by sending it to China or to some other country. In United States the situation has been further plagued by the wide spread practice of lobbying. Ironically, associations such as the International Association of Electronic Recyclers (IAER), the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries (ISRI) or Bureau of International Recycling (BIR) have pressured politicians against promoting laws that support genuine recycling and ban exports of electronic waste." "They claimed that the U.S. electronics recycling industry couldn't handle the job, and that was ridiculous. There is not one electronics recycler in this country that is at capacity," said Lauren Roman, vice president of United Recycling Industries in West Chicago. "We have 300,000 square feet devoted to this recycling. We have upgraded our monitor processing line, and through efficient shredding and separation, we produce clean aluminum, clean steel, glass, etc. We have 100 percent recovery. We can do 6,000 monitors in one day. We'd be running this line '24/7' if the monitors were available. And we are just one company." In Europe the situation looks a little better due to the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Directive. This regulation will be enforced from 1 January 2007. According to the WEEE, in case an EU member state disposes of electronic waste to some other non-EU country, it should monitor that that non-EU state complies with the European standards of proper recycling. This means that in the EU one can only resort to a recycling company that has proof it complies to the proper standard (has a certain certificate of quality) - regardless of where in

the world that recycling company is. A similar initiative, Senate Bill 20, was attempted in California, but according to its critics, the results are "perverse": "Not only does the bill fail miserably to make producers responsible for cleaning up their act and producing less toxic electronic waste, but also we are horrified to observe that last-minute industry lobbying has created legislation that actually will pay waste recyclers to sweep out California's electronic waste to the poorest communities of the world via the back-door of export," said Jim Puckett the coordinator of Basel Action Network. "Perversely, more waste than ever before could be exported, and this time it will likely be exported with the blessing and funding from the great state of California." Migrant child from Hunan province sits atop one of countless piles of unrecyclable computer waste imported from around the world. Guiyu, China. Woman about to smash a cathode ray tube from a computer monitor in order to remove the copper laden yoke at the end of the funnel. The glass is laden with lead but the biggest hazard from this is the inhalation of the highly toxic phosphor dust coating inside. Monitor glass is later dumped in irrigation canals and along the river where it leaches lead into the groundwater. The groundwater in Guiyu is completely contaminated to the point where fresh water is trucked in constantly for drinking purposes. Guiyu, China. Electronic waste dumped in residential area just outside of Alaba market in Lagos, Nigeria. This e-waste is routinely burned here. It is estimated that as much as 75% of what arrives in Lagos via importation cannot be repaired and sold. Children standing in front of smoldering electronic waste dump just outside of the Alaba market in Lagos, Nigeria. Burned electronic waste produced polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, dioxins and heavy metal emissions - carcinogenic and highly toxic chemicals. These children live next to the dump. Pictures Credit: Basel Action Network, <http://www.ban.org>