



Less than 1% of household garbage in Sweden ends up in a landfill.

Geography 2m read by Nicole Garner Meeker

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One country's trash can be another's treasure. In Sweden, household waste is valuable because it helps create energy. Only about [1% of the country's trash](#) ends up in landfills; 49% is recycled, and the remaining 50% is incinerated at one of Sweden's "waste-to-energy" power plants. There, [heat from burned trash is used to generate energy](#) in the same way that power plants burn coal or gas. Waste-powered electricity makes up a small fraction of Sweden's power grid overall, however: Nuclear, hydro, and wind power account for 90% of the country's



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Europe is home to more than 400 national parks, though the very first was created in Sweden. Sarek National Park, located in the country's north, was established in 1909, and features nearly 100 glaciers and six of Sweden's tallest mountain peaks.

Incinerating trash may seem like an easy solution to minimizing use of landfills, but some environmental experts say doing so isn't the best solution. That's because [burning trash releases pollutants](#) into the atmosphere, and [doesn't reduce the production of plastic products](#), which are made from fossil fuels.

Nevertheless, Sweden remains a global leader in recycling efforts. In 1984, the [country enacted a deposit system](#) — called “pant” — for aluminum cans (with plastic bottles following 10 years later), in which [reverse vending machines accept bottles and cans](#) and then print off deposit vouchers that can be redeemed at grocery stores. In 2020, the country edged closer to its “zero waste” goal, with Swedes recycling a staggering [94% of their glass and 78% of discarded paper](#) products.



Numbers Don't Lie

"Waste-to-energy" power
plants in Sweden

34

Estimated population of
Sweden

10.6 million

Year the first sanitary
landfill opened in the
U.S., in Fresno

1937

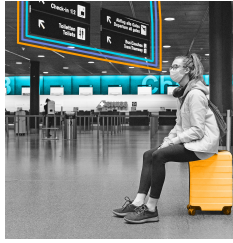
Amount of trash (in tons)
produced globally in one
day

3.5 million



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sculptures were
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Did You Know?



South Korea is recycled.

While technically biodegradable, food waste can have negative effects on the environment — particularly when it ends up in a landfill and produces methane, a greenhouse gas. That's why South Korea began banning food from landfills in 2005 and instead has a robust recycling program that encourages composting and food reuse. Today, about [95% of food waste in South Korea is recycled](#), compared to 2% at the time the ban was enacted. Citizens who don't compost can take food scraps to an area recycling station, where their trash is weighed and logged; households then receive a monthly bill based on the amount they toss out. Collected food is turned into fertilizer or animal feed, and methane and natural gases produced during the recycling process (called biogas) are also used to create energy that fuels the recycling facility, giving each tossed scrap a second opportunity to help nourish the planet.



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