



PLASTIC EXPORTATION TO RURAL MALAYSIA

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL
[#12: Responsible Consumption and Production](#)

POSSIBLE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Why is plastic waste exported to low-income countries?
- What socio-economic, public health, and environmental impacts does the exportation of recyclable waste have on the countries who import it?
- How does American recycling impact vulnerable groups abroad? In America?
- What are the alternatives to exporting post-consumer recyclables?
- How does Jenjarom's story relate to SDG Goal #12?

BACKGROUND

Of all the recyclable goods in the world, only 9% are actually recycled. Those recycled plastics are most often from industrial goods such as car bumpers and PVC pipes. Post-consumer plastic products such as candy wrappers, shampoo bottles, and plastic bags are more often incinerated, dumped in landfills, or exported to low-income countries, causing an array of public health and environmental impacts that are felt most by vulnerable communities.

One of these communities is Jenjarom, an Eastern Malaysia town of palm plantations with 30,000 residents. Within Kuala Langat district, Jenjarom has been receiving plastic waste from countries like the United States, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Japan since 2015, but saw a massive uptick in 2018 when China banned the import of post-consumer recyclable goods. The waste was then redirected to countries like Malaysia.

To date, Jenjarom has amassed a total of 17,000 tons of foreign imported recyclable materials, equivalent to the weight of nearly two Eiffel Towers. To process the waste, illegal recycling plants opened in the area creating public health, socio-economic, and environmental harm to the Jenjarom community. As the first illegal recycling plants cropped up, Jenjarom citizens didn't know they existed, but they would smell a noxious odor every night. The community founded the Kuala Langat Environmental Action Association (KLAA) to investigate the stench. They discovered the odor was coming from burning plastic which caused respiratory and epidermis health problems for residents within Jenjarom. The KLAA found that the incinerated plastic was dumped into the surrounding waterways and land harming the environment and farmer's plantations. The KLAA is championed for drawing international attention to the problem of foreign post-consumer recycle waste dumping, pushing for the elimination of plastic waste imports and illegal recycling plants across Malaysia.

While much of the garbage in Jenjarom has been repossessed by the government of Malaysia, four tons remain within the town. The Department of Environment in Malaysia announced it would be repatriating over four tons of recyclable plastic to 13 countries in 2020. The waste will travel in 150 shipping containers returning to countries such as France, Canada, Spain, the United States, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Singapore. The cost of repatriation is borne by the shipping liners and companies that originally exported the waste to Malaysia. In addition, the Malaysian government has closed over 200 of the illegal recycling plants, though new factories continue to crop up.

Jenjarom's story is not unique to its community; the United States annually exports 1 million tons of plastic waste to over ten countries including Ecuador, Ghana, and Vietnam.

RESOURCES

Personal Stories

- [The Recycling Myth Documentary \(8:13\) \(Greenpeace Malaysia\)](#)
- [She Wanted Her Town To Breathe Clean Air. She Got Death Threats Instead \(Huff Post\)](#)
- [Meet the people who fought back against foreign waste plastic \(3:16\) \(BBC\)](#)
- [Jenjarom folk reclaim their right to a pollution-free life \(New Straits Times\)](#)

Art and Images

- [Eden, Artsy Daphy](#)
- [Small town, one big dumpsite for plastic waste \(The Malaysian Insight\)](#)
- [BorneoTalk Recycled Bottle Art Installation \(Artsy Daphy\)](#)
- [Goal 12: Responsible Consumption & Production \(World's Largest Lesson\)](#)
- [The Recycling Myth by Greenpeace Philippines \(Greenpeace\)](#)
- [Washed Up \(Alejandro Duran.com\)](#)

Articles

- [Where does your recycling go? \(University of Washington\)](#)
- [America's "Recycled" Plastic Waste is Clogging Landfills, Survey Finds \(The Guardian\)](#)
- [Recycling: Where is the plastic waste mountain? \(BBC\)](#)
- [Malaysia, flooded with plastic waste, to send some scrap back to source \(Reuters\)](#)
- [Response to the enforcement of the China National Sword Policy \(EPA\)](#)
- [Single-Use Plastics 101 \(Natural Resources Defense Council\)](#)
- [Taiwan Has One of the Highest Recycling Rates in the World. Here's How That Happened \(Enzia\)](#)
- [Malaysia To Return US Plastic Waste Shipment Under New UN Rules \(Reuters\)](#)

Data & Maps

- [Beat Plastic Pollution \(UN Environment\)](#)
- [Plastic Pollution \(Our World in Data\)](#)
- [Cumulative plastic waste generation and disposal \(Science Advances\)](#)
- [The Chinese import ban and its impact on global waste trade \(Science Advances\)](#)
- [Drowning in Plastic \(National Geographic\)](#)

Audio/Podcasts

- [Malaysia vows to send back illegal recycling shipments to countries including the US \(12:20\) \(The Takeaway, WNYC Studios\)](#)
- [China doesn't want your trash \(20:51\) \(Council on Foreign Relations\)](#)

Videos

- [Environment Minister of Malaysia bans imports of plastic importation \(5:49\) \(KiniTV\)](#)
- [The Plastic Problem \(54:08\) \(PBS - Malaysia coverage starting at 20:00\)](#)
- [Malaysia has sent back tons of plastic waste to rich countries, saying it won't be their 'garbage dump' \(3:45\) \(CNN\)](#)
- [What really happens to 'recycling' plastic in Japan \(2:39\) \(BBC\)](#)
- [Science 101: Plastics \(5:45\) \(National Geographic\)](#)
- [The Reality of Plastics \(2:07\) \(National Geographic\)](#)
- [The New Plastics Economy \(1:37\) \(NPEC\)](#)

Websites

- [Environmental Justice Atlas](#)
- [SDG 12](#)
- [Waste Less, Recycle More](#)
- [New Plastics Economy](#)

