

## Deconstructing the Package

The process of free world industrialization has created an astronomical amount of environmentally unfit materials. Anually 75 million tons of packaging is made in the U.S.A; and the packaging for food and beverages alone is a 500 dollar industry. From these figures, and others presented by Dan Imhoff at the EcoFarm conference 2006, on a pannel with Watershed Media; it is apparent that packaging plays a huge role in our lives. In his work *Paper or Plastic: Searching for Solutions to an Overpackaged World* he writes about about these roles and myths associated with packaging, the economic ideologies behind it as well as some of the alternatives.

The impact of packaging, and the waste that is instrinsically present in the overproduction of the synthetic materials that build this industry is very often an oversight when assessing the cause of our ecological degradation. There are many environmentally costly aspects of the packaging that come from its daily and universal usage such as energy, materials, transportation, animal/ecological contamination and unbiodegradable waste. Some of the damage caused is from wood based material, which is two thirds of world wide packaging. Synthetic dioxins, among the other toxic release from chlorinated plastic are also part of the problem.

One of the myths surrounding packaging that he spoke about is the idea that change cannot be legislated. An example of this idea being proved a myth was the legislation passed by the European Union making people fiscally responsible for waste, and extending producer responsibility. There actually is a tax (or maybe just a price charged) for bags in grocery stores.

Another myth is that curbside recycling is the ultimate act of recycling. This is not true because even if the materials in that bin have been recycled, it is the responsibility of consumers to check how much post consumer content is in the packaging of the subsequent products that they buy.

A huge problem in agriculture is the need for PVC (poly vinyl chloride) for irrigation systems. A possible alternative that Imhoff spoke about is PLA, (polylactide), which is a biodegradable corn based plastic. He explained it by saying something about the alternative being viable since it is just rearranging the hydrocarbons back to carbohydrates. This would also eliminate the health risks associated with the toxic emissions from PVC production, since new diseases are being found due to the over accumulation of hydrocarbons in our systems.

The answer to the question of his book is therefore a complicated one, though the immediated alternative is canvas instead of paper or plastic (for shopping bags). I tried to make his presentation turn full circle by asking him my response to his two opening questions: why are we here?, and what are we leaving behind? The questions that started to float around in my mind were about the legacy that humans are leaving behind on this planet in passing, and how much of it is entrenched – as a *necessary* byproduct, in our purpose for being here; but there wasn't time for him to adequately address me.