



A day in the life of a recycling plant

Experts tell us that planet earth is in trouble. Our landfills are chock-a-block, tyres in the ocean are causing plastic islands of waste, and the hole in the ozone is messing with our summers. What can we as consumers do to ease the burden on our planet's resources?

Justin Nurse sorts and separates.

On any given Thursday, there's a long line of cars and trolleys on an unassuming stretch of road in Bellville, Cape Town, all queuing to get inside the MyPlas recycling plant to convert their plastic into cash. Thursday is payday and cash is king.

MyPlas is at the coalface of SA's recycling future. The process is fascinating: bailed (compressed) plastic is what usually gets delivered and paid for by the kilo. It then gets chopped up and ground into flakes before being rigorously washed. The plastic flakes

then get melted and screened (similar to how you'd pan for diamonds), so as to remove any lingering dirt and residue. And then it gets turned into pellets, at which stage necessary virgin plastic additives are included to beef up the quality. →



SORTING AND GRINDING

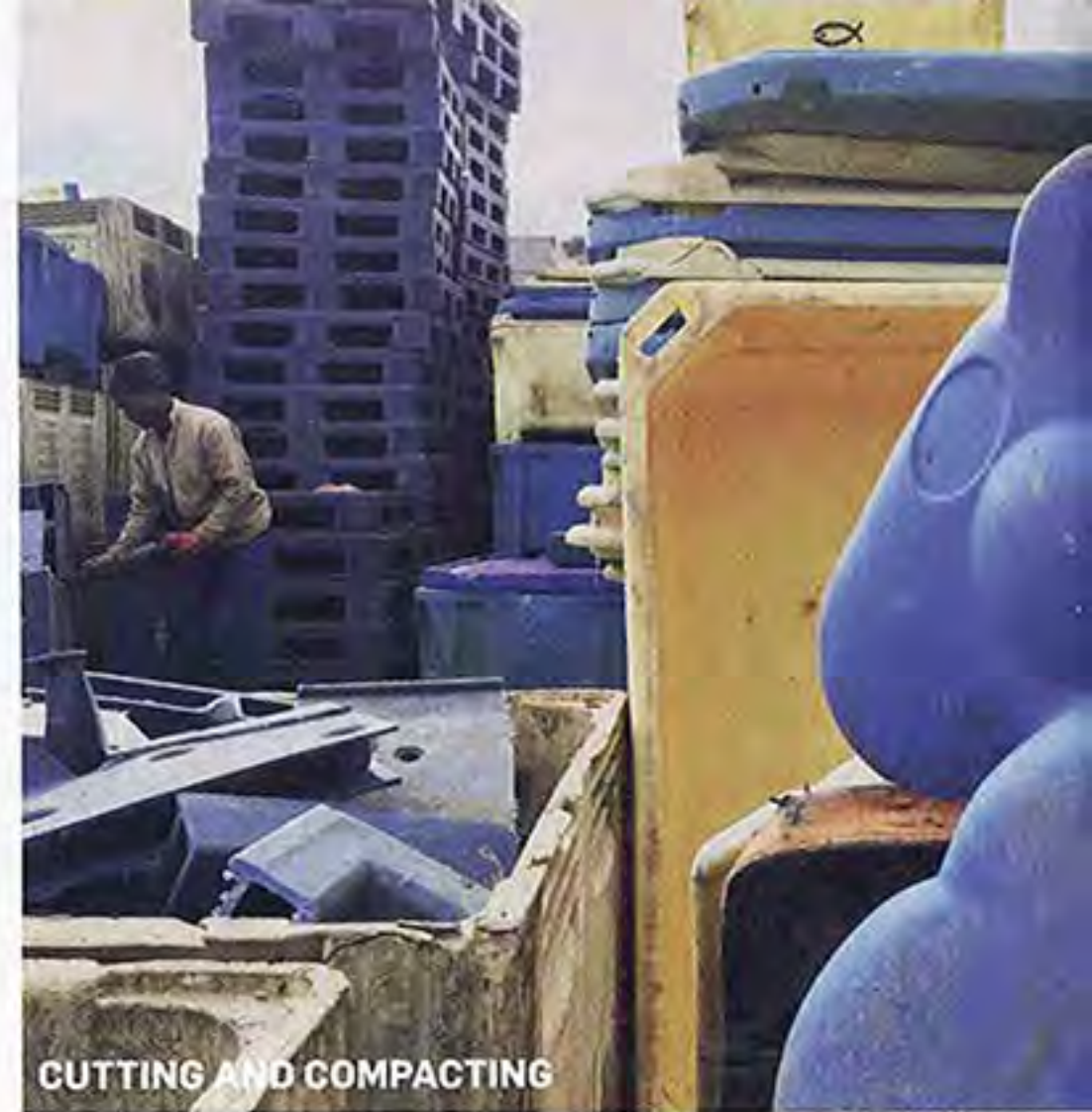
The pellets are turned into a variety of different products, ranging from agricultural piping to plastic furniture, drop sheets, toys, stationery and in some cases even back into packaging.

SEPARATION AT SOURCE

You (yes, you), me, all of us: reduce, reuse, recycle. This much we all understand by now from the environmental movement's mantra. How we apply that thinking is through diligence and a sense of civic duty.

Tell yourself that you don't want your child to grow up in a world filled with overflowing landfills. Take comfort in the knowledge that someone's had the genius idea to make some bucks out of your trash as you schlep your carefully separated recycling off to your nearest recycling depot.

First step: visit mywaste.co.za, polyco.co.za or plasticsinfo.co.za and find out where your nearest recycling depot is – usually at a shopping centre or local school.



CUTTING AND COMPACTING

It's easy enough to learn online what can and can't be recycled in South Africa, and it's easier than giving blood – just put your recyclables (paper, cans, glass and plastic) into one clear plastic bag and they'll do the sorting. Like giving blood, it feels good to be a contributing member of your community.

If we all separated at the source a lot more, we'd be the All Blacks of recycling. As it currently stands, South Africa is considered one of the world leaders in mechanical recycling. Not bad for a third-world country, hey?

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Let's zoom out to the bigger picture here quickly. As a country, we use 1.4-million tonnes of virgin plastic each year, and of that, roughly 800 000 tonnes go into packaging. We recycle 290 000 tonnes each year, give or take. In 50 to 60 years, when our oil fields run dry, we'll run out of plastic. Ouch!

So the plastics-producing industry has plenty of room for growth. And by growth, I really mean shrinking: using lighter packaging, recycling and reusing more to ensure that less plastics end up on the country's landfills, where a valuable resource is lost forever. Getting on board with POLYCO and other material recovery organisations →



GROUND PLASTIC



PREPARING THE PLASTIC FOR WASHING



THE GRINDING MACHINE

MROs), whose mandate is zero plastic waste at landfills by 2030, not just 'greenwashing' (outrageously misleading claims on packaging), and adopting a more long-term, 'what's in society's best interests' bottom-line approach are all things that brand owners and retailers could do a whole lot more.

Here's what SA's doing so far:

THE BIG PLAYERS

POLYCO is one of SA's major players, operating as somewhat of a 'conscience' for the plastics industry by getting membership buy-in from our plastic producers and then spending that dough on worthy initiatives that increase the recycling rate of polyolefin plastics, typically used in the harder, stronger

packaging materials of milk bottles, margarine tubs, ice-cream containers and household cleaning bottles. Apart from POLYCO, the plastics industry has other MROs that focus on specific types of plastics. PETCO supports the recycling of PET bottles; the Southern African Vinyls Association encourages the recycling of products made from PVC; and the Polystyrene Packaging Council drives polystyrene recycling projects around the country.

TROLLEYPRENEURS

A 'trolleypreneur' is a noble name for the trolley brigades who scour our streets collecting valuable trash from the kerbs and hauling it off to buy-back centres. They can make an average of

R150 a day doing this – if the going's good. Depending on where you live, the going's only good if we play our part and provide clean, separated, compacted recycling packaging. Because the thing with plastic is that it's voluminous. Pound for pound it's worth more than scrap metal, but it's lighter, and there are only so many two-litre milk bottles you can fit in your trolley. By compacting the material, transportation costs are cut down where it matters.

There are various civic and community-driven initiatives nationwide that are attempting to tackle this problem. Recycling speaks to the heart of how we engage with each other as a community, and herein lies the seed to our future success. →



CLOSE-UP OF A PLASTIC BAIL

Whether it's trolleypreneurs with identifiable bibs patrolling your neighbourhood and keeping your streets clean, or an on-site recycling depot at your office block, it's really up to each and every one of us to start taking ownership from the get-go.

BUY-BACK CENTRES

At this stage of the operation, we see the entrepreneurial spirit alive and kicking. And truly, if we are to save our asses on earth (that's if Elon Musk doesn't whisk us all away to life on another planet first), we're gonna need market-driven economics to play its part.

The buy-back centres are the link between the trolleypreneurs and the community-driven recycling depots, and then recycling depots such as MyPlas. They are the guys with the bailers and the grinders, the small business owners who rock up on a Thursday at MyPlas with bakkie loads of compacted recycling.

When imagination meets supply and demand at this juncture, entire micro-industries can be the result. Jimi in Pretoria recycles 20 tonnes of polystyrene a month that goes into mouldings for things such as picture frames and the cornices used on coffins. Oliver from Cape Town is a social entrepreneur who started Street Sleeper, converting used PVC billboards into waterproof, windproof survival sleeping bags for the homeless. Success stories are out there.

So whether you're a housewife with a handbag or a corporate cool cat with access to the company's CSR budget, listen up to the truths that have here been proffered and help play your part in shaping SA's bright recycling future. ■



PLASTIC PELLETS FOR PIPING



PLASTIC PELLETS