
SUSTAIN-A-THON DESCRIPTION

I wanted to use the Sustain-A-Thon to address personal household waste reduction by consuming as little plastic as I could. In some ways I think you are not only what you eat but also what you throw away and I noticed that unrecyclable and hard to recycle plastics seemed to be a constant in my garbage bin. My goal for the Sustain-A-Thon was to use and throw away non-recyclable plastic only when necessary and recycle all other plastics for a month starting on September 28th. Inherent in this goal was the need to define for myself “necessary” plastic use.

The context for this effort is important because my focus on plastic was a response to several waste reduction experiments I had started at the beginning of 2008. In January of 2008 I removed all but one waste basket from my apartment and set a goal of emptying this waste basket once a month. By the middle of March I realized that I could go about 3 months before I needed to empty the basket. By the middle of September I had emptied the basket 3 times since January and noticed that most of the waste I was throwing away was plastic (see picture to right). By the time the Sustain-A-Thon started I had calculated my waste stream to be roughly one cubic foot of waste a year (this basket is roughly $\frac{1}{4}$ of a cubic foot). Since plastic was the majority of my remaining waste stream in 2008 the Sustain-A-Thon provided a great opportunity to see what I could do about reducing plastic use. Below I have outlined some of the findings from my plastic experiment.



Narada's household waste from June 1st to Sept. 28th, 2008

SUSTAIN-A-THON FINDINGS

I found that I could reduce my plastic consumption significantly due to my Sustain-A-Thon efforts but found it very challenging to achieve a true zero waste lifestyle. I was able to reduce my non-recyclable plastic consumption to literally one handful of plastic during the month I was participating in the Sustain-A-Thon but it is important to note that this month did not include any major holidays, I did not need any major bike or home repairs and I did not make any major purchases.

Below I have included a sample of the plastic items I normally buy and the substitutions I was able to and not able to make during the Sustain-A-Thon. It is important to note that I traveled to Southern California and Denver during this month from Sept. 28th to Oct. 28th and was not working so I was engaged in habits that were not part of my typical routine.

Typical Plastic Item:	Substitution:	Notes:
Cheese wrapper	Deli cheese in wax paper	Can be more expensive
Tortillas	Homemade tortillas	Tasty yet time consuming
Tortilla Chips	Bulk tortilla chips	Only offered at a few stores
Bread bags	Fresh baked bread	Preferred if a bakery is close
Plastic bags for bulk items	Cloth bags w/ drawstring	Washable and nicer to use
Toothpaste caps	Baking soda	Works well / tastes bad
Plastic caps (sauces, etc.)	Homemade sauces	Taste good and cheaper
Plastic caps (cleaners)	Bulk supplies where possible	Limits cleaning supplies
Plastic wrapping (electronic devices and equipment)	Didn't find good substitution	Could decide to not purchase these or try to buy used
Bike tires and supplies	Didn't find good substitution	
Plastic friends bring to house	Pack-it-in Pack-it-out policy	Good way to tell friends and family what you are doing