

Study scraps food waste fallacies

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Geography PhD candidate Paul van der Werf, who boasts a quarter century in environmental consulting, is examining waste in London, looking to find why Londoners throw away significant amounts of food and what can be done to reduce the organic haul that ends up in landfills. Credit: University of Western Ontario

For Paul van der Werf, it's not about food waste. It's about food.

"It's not just your banana peels and egg shells and coffee grounds. You should see what ends up thrown away – untouched and left-over food, like a \$12 roast. At that point, you're just rolling up a ball of money and throwing it into the garbage," said van der Werf, a Geography PhD candidate with 25 years of experience in environmental consulting.

Through his consulting company, 2CG, van der Werf measures residential and commercial [waste](#) composition and provides and analyzes data to a wide variety of municipal and provincial governments. It's information local governments use to put together reports and make informed decisions about environmental initiatives.

"What I've now been able to do is combine my expertise in waste management, [organic waste management](#) and measurement with the food piece, which I have been interested in for a long time," van der Werf said.

Part of his doctoral research is examining food waste in London, looking to find why Londoners throw away significant amounts of food and what can be done to reduce the organic haul that ends up in landfills. He hopes to offer the city data it can use to initiate waste reduction or intervention initiatives. Such a study has not only environmental implications, but fiscal and social, as well, van der Werf stressed.

"When I'm looking at intervention, all I want to do is reconnect [people](#) to what's always very important. Your resources are really important to you. That's the thrust of my messaging and research," he said.

"It's less about managing waste, but more about preventing it from happening. It's not about food waste. People aren't managing their food properly – so food becomes waste. How do we change our thinking?"

For his research, van der Werf is looking at the individual household in London, exploring what's generated in waste and developing metrics around that. What is the worth of food waste per household? What is that worth in a city like London? What sort of greenhouse gas implications are there? What are the social implications? How many meals – which could potentially feed individuals in need – does our food waste amount to?

Earlier this year, van der Werf distributed a survey across London asking respondents to reflect on their food purchases, as well as habits and motivations related to food and food waste. Of 1,700 respondents, 600 volunteered for the second part of the study involving collection and analysis of their household waste. Only 110 volunteers were needed, he noted.

"I am coming up with solid evidence-based metrics. You see [food waste](#) numbers out there and they are OK, but they are not quality numbers, and people keep repeating them over and over. You can't action stuff like that," van der Werf said.

"I'm trying to do it ground up, to develop strong, evidence-based calculations of what's going on, and from there, develop some interventions, strategies or actions we can use to help people reduce the food that becomes waste. It's a management issue; it's a personal issue that speaks to everyone."

Generally speaking, van der Werf finds food represents roughly 30 per cent of waste. And it's not just leftovers. A lot is expired food that hasn't been touched. From data gathered so far in London, the average household throws out about \$600 – or 125 kg – worth of food each year. That's the equivalent of 0.6 acres of lost agricultural production. It's a loss of 323 meals a year – meals that could feed someone in need, van der Werf added.

"Food and organic waste makes up about 30-35 per cent of waste in London. The city does have a couple of good backyard compost programs and might have a green-bin program at some point. My research will help them maybe identify how that might be shaped," he explained.

"A key benefit is scoping out what we need to do with food. Do we put a program in place to discourage people from putting food in the garbage? Do we provide people with better ways or tools to manage food? Maybe we give them an incentive, or at least appeal to them by saying this is costing a lot of money. We have one part of the population who is prosperous, who has enough money to buy food and dispose food. On the other hand, we have people who have to go to a [food](#) bank. If we were able to reduce waste by 50 per cent even, and save money, might you be able to contribute some of that saved money to people who don't have it?"

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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