

Getting to zero: the Japan town trying to recycle all its waste

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The Japanese town of Kamikatsu already recycles about 80 percent of its rubbish but is aiming for 'zero-waste' by 2020

Plastic, paper, metal? In Japan's Kamikatsu, sorting rubbish isn't that simple. Residents face a mind-boggling 45 separate categories for their

garbage as the town aims to be "zero-waste" by 2020.

And that's not all: there isn't even trash collection. The 1,500 residents of the town in western Japan have to transport their [waste](#) themselves to a local facility.

"Yes, it's complicated," said Naoko Yokoyama, a 39-year-old resident who had brought her trash to the town's waste centre.

"But I have become more environmentally conscious since I moved here a year ago," she told AFP.

The categories cover everything from pillows to toothbrushes as the town aims to recycle all its waste, sending nothing to incinerators, by next year.

The process can be onerous—not only are there dozens of separate categories, but items like [plastic bags](#) and bottles must be washed and dried to facilitate recycling.

At the town's waste facility, there are dozens of different boxes for each category. If the parts of an item fall into different categories for recycling, residents are expected to take them apart and send each bit to the right container.

One man who had brought in a shelf had to use a hammer to prise the wood from the metal, while elsewhere workers chopped up a thick, long rubber tube so it would fit into a sorting box.



Waste is sorted into 45 categories for recycling and residents are expected to dismantle items falling into more than one category

Many parts of Japan already require separation of rubbish, but most areas have just a few categories, with the bulk of household waste going to incinerators.

'Let's recycle'

Kamikatsu was not much different until an ultimatum: in 2000, the town was ordered to shut down one of its incinerators because it no longer met stricter emissions standards.

That left the town with just one incinerator that couldn't handle all of Kamikatsu's waste, and there wasn't enough money for a new one or to pay a neighbouring town for use of theirs.

"We thought, 'If we can't burn waste in the town, then let's recycle.' It's cheaper to recycle waste than burn it," said town official Midori Suga.

Kamikatsu is already close to achieving its goal, recycling about 80 percent of the 286 tonnes of waste it produced in 2017, far more than the national average of 20 percent.



The 1,500 residents of Kamikatsu have to transport their own rubbish to the town's waste centre and sort it

The remainder, like most waste in Japan, is incinerated, as the country's mountainous terrain considered unsuitable for landfills.

The nation produces less general waste per person than most developed countries, but it generates more [plastic](#) waste per capita than anywhere except the United States.

In the past, some plastic was exported for recycling, particularly to China, but a ban by Beijing on imports has left plastic recyclables piling up in parts of Japan.

Still, not all residents think the initiative could work elsewhere.

"It works because we're only 1,500 people here," said Yokoyama, who moved from Kyoto.

"It would be difficult in a big town with a larger population," she added, because authorities would struggle to enforce it.



Besides sorting, items like packaging and bottles must be washed and dried to facilitate recycling



Japan generates more plastic waste per capita than anywhere except the United States



Kamikatsu's decision to aim for 'zero-waste' was spurred by the closure of one of its two incinerators because it no longer met strict emissions standards

Reduce consumption

But other residents say the policy is just common sense.

"I understand it's convenient to just burn waste," said 71-year-old local Saeko Takahashi, as she washed milk cartons and tied newspapers together.

"It's better to recycle, it's such a waste otherwise," she explained.

She uses a compost bin for [food waste](#) such as fish and meat and throws

vegetable waste directly into her garden.

"Food lasts longer when it's shipped in plastic packaging. So it's not all bad, but multiple layers of plastic aren't necessary," added Takahashi.



Saeko Takahashi, 71, separates trash into different boxes at her home in Kamikatsu and uses a compost bin for food waste

Kazuyuki Kiyohara, manager of the waste centre, said plastic makes up the majority of the residents' waste—and despite the scheme there has been little reduction in consumption.

"Our lifestyle depends mainly on plastic," the 38-year-old said, adding:

"Consumers can reduce plastic waste to a certain extent, but we'll still have waste if producers keep making plastic products."

In 2018, Japan's government unveiled a proposal to tackle plastic waste, with the goal of reducing the 9.4 million tonnes produced by the country each year by a quarter by 2030.

The plan proposes that retailers should charge for plastic bags—a measure already widely adopted around the world—but that isn't expected to come into effect before 2020 and other types of [plastic packaging](#) won't be covered.

Town official Suga said even Kamikatsu will struggle to achieve zero-waste without stronger efforts to reduce consumption.

She said: "We have made efforts to achieve zero incineration and zero landfill disposal goals, but it's not enough."

She explained: "We shouldn't focus just on how to dispose of trash. We need to come up with policies that prevent the production of waste."

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