

HIGHLIGHTS

Prairie State College (PSC) is **home to a new beehive** through which students can learn about the importance of pollinators to nature and food systems. This summer, several students will help professor Massengill manage the hive by conducting weekly inspections; in the future, the hive could facilitate learning in biology, beekeeping, and business classes.

Thanks to your help, we now have a better understanding of how our students, staff and faculty get to and from the college and will be using this data to quantify our **commute-related environmental footprint!**

[Check out the findings here.](#)

The University of Illinois Extension is offering an 11-week **course on Urban Farming** this summer at the Urban Agriculture Demonstration Site at Prairie State College's Matteson Area Center. This is the first of many trainings that will be happening at the newly developed site; so if you couldn't get registered in time for this training, look out for future offerings.

[Learn more about the program here.](#)



What can I do to help?

- **Participate in Meatless Mondays:** Even if you're not about to go vegan tomorrow, there's no real reason we need meat in our lives every...single...day... Get creative and try a new protein (seitan, tofu, quinoa, lentils, nuts, amaranth, chickpeas, etc.) on Mondays!

UPCOMING



The Park Forest People of Faith are hosting an event at St. Irenaeus Church in Park Forest from 2 to 4 p.m. on June 23 called "**Climate Change: the Issues, the Consequences, the Challenges.**" This event will include a keynote from WGN-TV Meteorologist Tom Skilling, and other speakers: Deer Park Mayor Dale Sands, and former Park Forest Mayor John Osteburg. (Free and open to all)



There will be a "**Recycle Fest**" on July 27 from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. in Park Forest at the intersection of Main Street and Cunningham Drive. Many types of waste will be accepted, including electronics, paper shredding, plastic bags, American flags, used clothing & shoes, prescription drugs, eyeglasses, foam containers, and more. This event is open to residents and non-residents.

IN THE NEWS

Are you skeptical about taking action to stop climate change? You're not alone. [In this op-ed for The Bulwark](#) (a right-leaning news and opinion site), Jerry Taylor - a former Vice President at a powerful libertarian D.C. think-tank (The Cato Institute) - outlines the primary reason that he now thinks differently about climate change: risk management. I would highly recommend [checking it out here](#) if you or anyone you know is not convinced of the need for climate action by environmental protection-related arguments.

Barcelona is stepping up its "superblock" game. Not to be confused with the Lego rivals, "superblocks" represent a [new way to understand urban transportation systems](#). By blocking off a square of nine city blocks to through traffic, these "superblocks" are reclaiming open spaces in five neighborhoods of the city for pedestrians, bicycles, block parties, four-square games, and neighborly interactions. What started as a pilot program aimed at improving air quality and decreasing noise pollution may now be expanding to 500 "superblocks" all across the city. [Read more.](#)

Better late than never. Seven years after McDonald's stopped using foam in its hot beverage cups, and about 6 years after a [10-year old forced Jamba Juice](#) to do the same with its smoothie cups, Dunkin' Donuts has announced that it is on track to replace its styrofoam coffee cups with Sustainable Forestry Initiative certified double-walled paper cups by the end of this year. [Read more.](#)



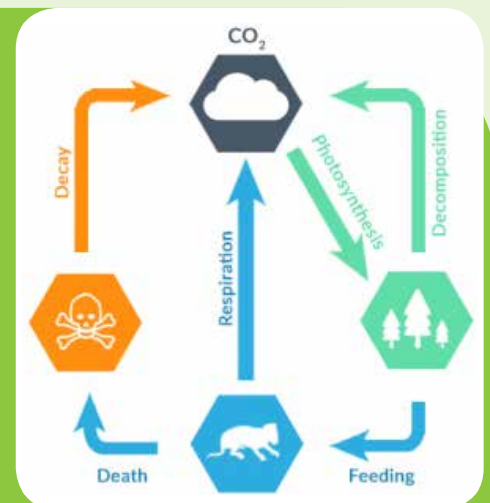
A recent UN report estimates that **one million** (of about eight million total) **species are at significant risk of extinction** due to the systemic impacts of humans. This report shows that biodiversity loss is a problem that must be addressed at the global level. The report also highlights the dependence that humans have on these species: we could lose hundreds of billions of dollars in agricultural production without pollinators, and hundreds of millions of people already face increased risk of floods due to "loss of coastal habitats," for example. [Read more.](#)

WORDS: Carbon Neutral

To understand what "carbon neutral" means, first, it's important to have a basic understanding of how the carbon cycle works. The carbon cycle, much like the water cycle that we all learn about growing up, is a natural process. This is essentially [how it works](#).

The earth does a pretty great job of balancing the levels of carbon in the atmosphere by itself: plants suck up carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and then release it again as they decompose, for example. At least that's how it was *until we started burning fossil fuels* (a stockpile of ancient carbon that without our input would remain buried almost indefinitely). This disruption of the carbon cycle is the primary driver of climate change since - without our intervention - these fossil fuels would remain safely locked up underground. Compounding the impacts of this reintroduction of ancient carbon into the atmosphere is our destruction of forests that have the capacity to sequester countless tons of carbon in biomass. (Between 1990 and 2010, the world lost about [135 million hectares of forest!](#))

The term "*carbon neutral*" refers to a commitment to emit only as much carbon as an entity sequesters (or pulls, directly or indirectly, from the atmosphere). For example, a company could become carbon neutral by either (a) not emitting any carbon (using only renewable energy, for example), or (b) doing enough "carbon negative" activities (planting trees, capturing landfill methane, producing renewable energy, etc.) to fully offset the carbon they do emit.



SPOTLIGHT

Eleven different faculty and staff members came together to put on a wide variety of events and activities to celebrate Earth Week 2019 and promote awareness of sustainability on campus. With the support of almost 120 attendees, they

- planted native pollinator-attracting species in the butterfly garden,
- documented the plants and critters living in our nature preserve,
- got an under-the-hood look at the transition from gasoline to electric vehicles,
- learned about climate change and resource depletion from student experts,
- helped support and learned about the Matteson Area Center urban agriculture demonstration site with experts from the University of Illinois Extension, and
- learned how sustainability is baked into Pottawatomie culture and the basics of foraging.

If you see something here that you would really like to have been at but weren't able to make, let Joel know. Also, get in touch if we missed a topic you want to know more about. We want to know what you want to know!



Got Ideas?

If you have ideas for helping our campus run more efficiently, produce less waste, offer sustainability-related courses or programs or generally be more sustainable, contact PSC's Sustainability Coordinator Joel Nightingale at jnightingale@prairiestate.edu or extension 3727.



FORWARD THINKING: Does My Recycling Even Get Recycled?

Lately, I've been getting a lot of questions about recycling. Most of the questions revolve around the news that China - who, until recently, was taking about [40 percent of our recyclables](#) - is no longer interested in taking the United States' low-value waste.

For many, this news seems to have triggered a distrust in their local waste hauler which leaves them helplessly searching for someone who will *actually recycle* their recyclables since their once-reliable outlet is - in their minds - probably just landfilling what they put in their green bin. Does it even matter that I separate my plastic, paper, and aluminum from my trash if it all ends up in a pit somewhere anyway?

The short answer to that question, as unfulfilling as it sounds is, "it's complicated." What I really like about this issue is that it is the perfect jumping off point to learn more about how waste and recycling systems work. Henry Grabar at *Slate* wrote a beautiful article with a title that encapsulates many people's fundamental misunderstanding of the global recycling system: [Recycling Isn't About the Planet. It's About Profit](#). (If you only have time for one article on recycling, stop reading mine and start reading Grabar's.)

As the title would imply, what makes recycling "work" is not some flowery altruistic desire of our waste haulers to save the environment by putting trash back into productive use, but the material value of those plastic bottles, aluminum cans and paper fibers as feedstocks for the manufacturing process of new products. This means that in a sense, no, waste haulers **don't** care what happens to your recyclables; at least not from an environmental perspective. What they **do** care about, is making money; which, depending on whom you talk to, means they are either (1) the enemy, or (2) a business (...maybe both).

Once the mindset shifts from tree-hugging to economics, it's easier to get a more realistic understanding of how the system works and where its current issues originate. The economic viability of recycling depends on a lot of variables, many of which are not within the consumer's control, including but not limited to:

- virgin feedstock prices (oil, tree fiber, bauxite, etc.),
- demand for goods made from that material,
- quality of waste (Is it clean? Is it well separated? etc.).

And that third piece brings me back to a term in the first sentence of this article: "low-value waste." China, until 2017, was willing to take our waste knowing that they had a cheap way (read: low-wage labor and lax environmental protections enforcement) to sort and redirect that waste into feedstocks for their manufacturing industry.

However, this model turned out not to be sustainable. The buying and selling agreement from exporting countries to China is a prime example of what economists call *adverse selection*: a concept described by George Akerlof in his seminal work, ["The Market for Lemons."](#) Akerlof describes a system in which low-quality cars ("lemons") saturate the used car market and, as a result, drag down the price of increasingly scarce high-quality used cars since buyers feel a need to hedge against getting "lemons."

FORWARD THINKING: Does My Recycling Even Get Recycled? (cont'd.)

Like a used car dealer, China originally agreed to purchase the bulk of the world's waste with the assumption that it would get a reasonable mix: both low-value waste, *and*, importantly, high-value waste (clean, uncontaminated, well-sorted, etc.). But as China continued to be barraged by waste-exporters with primarily low-value waste, it was only willing to purchase it at a low-value price and effectively slowed the stream of high-value waste. This crashed the recyclable waste market and China had no option but to stop buying all exported waste. Even if another country steps up to be the next buyer of the world's waste, the crash is likely to repeat itself.

There's no doubt that China deciding not to take our waste was a shock to the system, but systems can recover; and if this shock can encourage a more sustainable model than simply exporting our waste to a foreign land, it might all be for the better.

So what do we do in the meantime? If you care what I think, I would give two recommendations:

1. **Keep recycling recyclables.** If you take the nihilistic approach and start landfilling everything because recycling seems hopeless at the moment, you don't give the recycling commodities market a chance to adjust its approach and find new ways to turn your trash into someone else's treasure. Instead, you'll be turning a somewhat valuable material into an essentially valueless material by intermingling it with non-recyclables.
2. **Think differently about recycling.** In the [fall 2018 issue of this newsletter](#) I wrote a piece explaining "Why Recycling Doesn't Excite Me." Recycling, to many, is the epitome of sustainability, but in reality, it isn't much better than the landfill if we don't prioritize reuse and product longevity before our things end up categorized as "waste." Instead of trying to maximize what goes in your recycling bin, try maximizing what never ends up in *any* of the bins. Eliminate unnecessary packaging (and [reward companies who help](#)), repurpose durable containers, don't buy what you don't need, and [upcycle](#) what looks like junk.

[This issue's Forward Thinking section was co-authored by economics professor, Michael Massengill.]