

Sir David Attenborough

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Dear Sir David

First, I would like to say what a privilege it has been watching you on the many television documentaries you have hosted over the lifetime of years that I have followed and admired your work. Your achievements, I am quite certain, will seldom be surpassed.

I write to you today, not for political or commercial reasons, but for reasons profoundly more important than this. I am writing to bring to your attention a paradoxical truth about how the human race is harming our planet... by recycling paper.

This statement, I know, sounds instantly absurd – that an act performed by millions of people around the world each day in good faith could somehow be damaging to our environment. But paper is made of carbon that was once resident in the atmosphere as CO₂. It is this key truth that helps explain why burying paper underground in landfill the moment it has served a useful life as a product is more useful for reducing atmospheric CO₂ levels than if it is sent for recycling, which consumes more energy and releases more CO₂ back into the air than is locked up in the paper itself.

The knee-jerk response to the mention of burying paper in landfill is usually concerning the methane emissions from the decaying paper itself. This worrying reaction is, too, increasingly being shown to be a red herring. Not only does paper not decay to any extent previously thought in landfill, but any greenhouse gases that do escape – in particular methane – can either be collected or burned for energy.

So why do we recycle paper at all? Well, we basically rely upon three corners of thinking:

- That felling trees for paper is bad.
- That recycling paper requires fewer fossil fuel emissions to make more paper than starting again from scratch with wood pulp.
- That paper decays in landfill quickly and gives off methane and CO₂ in the process.

These are all wrong.

It is known that a growing sapling absorbs more CO2 from the atmosphere than a mature tree, which is typically carbon neutral. Therefore, if we replace a mature tree (in a managed plantation designed for this purpose) with a sapling we can, in principle, sequester more CO2 from the atmosphere.

It used to be true that making paper from virgin pulp required a little more energy than from recycled materials, but most modern paper mills now use biomass as their energy source and many can produce paper from virgin fibre for practically no CO2 emissions. This argument may have therefore been valid a decade ago, but is certainly no longer the case today.

The underlying logic for recycling says it is better to keep paper 'in service' for longer to stop the carbon getting back to the atmosphere. Remarkably, until very recently no serious attempt had ever been made to examine to what extent paper decays in landfill. The IPCC rules guide that paper decays by 50% within 12 years. However, the NSW Forestry Commission in Australia has been funding the excavation of landfill over the last 10 years. The scientist heading the team, Dr. Fabiano Ximenes, summarises his teams' findings:

"Recent experimental research and research conducted on excavated samples from landfill strongly suggest that a significant proportion of the carbon in a range of paper products can be considered to be stored for the long-term. These results indicate that paper products may play an important role in emissions trading, and also highlight the importance of using less generic decomposition factors when estimating avoided emissions from diverting paper from landfills."

That is to say, paper lasts a lot longer in landfill than previously thought. In fact, paper samples retrieved from 19 year old and 26 year old landfill sites showed no degradation at all in the paper.

The three corners of thinking that support the abolishment of paper recycling, then, might be summed up as follows:

- Felling mature trees in managed plantations and replacing them with saplings sequesters more CO2 from the atmosphere than not.
- There are no more fossil fuel emissions to manufacture paper from virgin fibre than recycled paper.
- Paper does not decay quickly in landfill and therefore landfill acts as a carbon sink.

In a recent consultation document the British government even states that that:

"forests and the forestry sector can help to reduce net greenhouse gas emissions by storing carbon in *growing* forests, by storing carbon in *harvested wood products*, by replacing fossil fuels with woodfuel and by replacing high energy products, such as concrete and steel, through more use of timber".

Isn't that precisely what abandoning recycling paper would do?

Sir David, I represent a small group of like-minded individuals who are attempting to make known the likely grave mistake the human race is making. We call ourselves 'Friends of Print and Paper' – or 'FOPAP' for short. It is in the latter context of our organisations name – that of being a friend of paper – that I am writing to you today.

We receive no funding and neither are we a charity. We perform all of our voluntary duties out of our concern for the environment and our affiliation with the printing, graphics arts and paper industries – in that order. We are looking for someone to champion our views. Your vast knowledge of the way the planet works, we believe, positions you better than most to make a critical judgment as to the validity of our claims.

We badly need exposure to bring these important ideas and messages to a wider audience and, unfortunately, we do not have a high level of support from the UK media. We have appeared in a couple of articles published by the Australian media, but we need much more.

Our website www.fopap.org contains a great many articles and evidences that we have prepared for public consumption. We believe it provides a compelling case for a re-think on world policy relating to paper recycling.

I would therefore welcome greatly your insights as to our logic and arguments and, if it is something you find yourself agreeing with, then maybe you would consider offering some words of support for our cause? Even a few positive sound bites would help our mission greatly. It goes without saying that if you wished to become more active in supporting our ideas, we would be honoured to have you as a patron or media champion.

If you would like me to provide you with any more information about the ideas I have briefly presented to you here, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

In the meantime, I wish you every success for the future and trust you continue to enjoy good health and happiness for many years to come.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Roche', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

John Roche
FOPAP

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