

Is Al Gore the answer to our waste problems?

Global warming is “the greatest challenge we’ve ever faced”, says Al Gore, former US vice president. Environmentalists, climate change scientists and a myriad of other so-called “do-gooders” have been saying the same for years. But after Gore’s documentary on global warming, *An Inconvenient Truth*, won an Oscar earlier in the year and Gore himself became the Nobel peace prize winner last month, it finally seems as if people might start to listen.

It’s ironic that it’s the former vice president of a country that is arguably one of the worst offenders, which abandoned the Kyoto treaty because of the impact it would have on the US economy regardless of the effect on the wider world, who is championing this viewpoint and finally beginning to make the world take notice.

The fact that the Nobel committee also cited the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to share the prize has gone largely unnoticed. But the panel, a group of 2,500 researchers from 130 countries, has spent two decades researching the effect human activities have on climate changes. Only now, thanks to Gore, is this work filtering out to the general public.

Here in the East of England, a similar awakening process is happening centred around how we deal with our waste. For years dumping in landfill was an acceptable solution, despite the climate change gases and pollution it emits. But landfill space is running out and organisations across the region are wondering what to do next, with incineration being the most likely but not the most popular solution. It is most likely because it’s a recognised answer which is tried and tested but it’s not terribly popular, especially among residents, because although it eliminates most of the waste, residues of about seven percent are left behind. And it’s those leftovers that is the really nasty, toxic stuff that needs to go into landfill anyway – or does it?

One of the obstacles in this raging waste debate is that organisations see waste as a problem, something to get rid of, something viewed in isolation. What we should really be doing is treating it as an asset.

In the same way we pillage the earth, searching for and extracting fossil fuels, we should pillage the waste – extracting all its useful components and reusing them. It’s just a question of technology. Recycle all the waste you can, then work with it to break it down into its original elements for reuse or power generation. That means you can avoid landfill altogether.

Extracting the metals, minerals and acids means they can be reused. Burning biomass creates electricity. Suddenly, instead of adding to Al Gore’s headache, diminishing our supply of fossil fuels and killing the planet, we are creating our own renewable energy – energy that can be reused again and again, energy that has less contribution to global warming, almost no polluting emissions, savings on health and its costs, and, in the long run, a lower cost.

To many, it’s a complete no-brainer, killing two birds with one stone, and all the other phrases you care to come up with. But we still have to convince the public and that’s where people like Al

Gore are worth their weight in gold. No one was terribly interested in third world poverty until rock stars like Bono and Bob Geldof got involved. The same is true for climate change. But the tide is turning and now it's up to us. As Al Gore said when he spoke in Cambridge earlier this year: "All future generations depend on our ability to face up to this challenge. This is our time to make a decision that will affect all others. Never have we faced a crisis that could end all of human civilisation. It's our only home and it is in jeopardy."

Chris Williams

Managing director, Peterborough Renewable Energy Ltd

Peterborough Renewable Energy Ltd wants to build a £250million energypark in Peterborough to turn waste into reusable products or energy, leaving nothing in landfill.

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