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FEATURE ARTICLE

E-waste: The Hidden Challenge of a "Throw-Away Society" in Fiji

As Green Action Week approaches, there is no better time to shed light on one of the most pressing yet often overlooked environmental challenges—electronic waste (E-waste). This issue has become a growing concern globally, with significant environmental and health impacts. In Fiji, the rise in consumer electronics, coupled with a "throw-away" culture, contributes significantly to the island nation's waste problem. This article will explore global E-waste statistics from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the consumer mindset, market pressures driving the latest product purchases, and the concept of a throw-away society, all in the context of Fiji.

What is E-waste?

Electronic waste/ E-waste refers to discarded electrical and electronic devices that are no longer in use or have reached the end of their functional life. This includes items such as old computers, smartphones, televisions, and household appliances. E-waste contains hazardous substances like mercury, lead, and cadmium, which can pose serious risks to the environment and human health if not properly managed or disposed of through appropriate recycling methods

The Global E-Waste Crisis: A Statistical Overview

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), global E-waste generation reached a staggering 53.6 million metric tonnes in 2019, and this number continues to rise. By 2030, it is projected to reach nearly 74 million metric tonnes, doubling the amount produced in 2014. The situation is alarming as only 17.4% of this E-waste is properly recycled, leaving the rest to either accumulate in landfills or be improperly discarded, leading to toxic chemicals leaching into the environment.

IUCN has warned that developing countries, including island nations like Fiji, are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of improper E-waste disposal. Fiji, although not a large-scale generator of E-waste, is still affected by global trends due to rising consumerism and increasing access to technology. The question remains: what is being done to manage E-waste in such regions?

E-Waste in Fiji: A Growing Concern

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While Fiji's E-waste generation might be modest compared to larger countries, it is growing at an alarming rate. This is due to a combination of factors, including rapid urbanization, increased access to electronic goods, and the penetration of global marketing that encourages the purchase of new gadgets. Unfortunately, Fiji lacks the infrastructure for proper E-waste recycling, with only a few recycling centres, mostly located in urban areas, leaving rural regions to deal with the consequences.

The Environmental Management Act (2005) and the Waste Disposal and Recycling Regulations (2007) provide a legal framework for handling waste in Fiji. However, specific regulations regarding E-waste management are still underdeveloped. In most cases, outdated electronics are either stored indefinitely or discarded with general waste, ending up in landfills. This improper disposal contributes to environmental hazards, as many electronic devices contain toxic substances such as mercury, lead, and cadmium.

Consumer Choices and the "Throw-Away" Culture

At the heart of the E-waste issue lies the modern consumer. In today's fast-paced world, where innovation in electronics is relentless, consumers are encouraged to replace their devices regularly. From smartphones to laptops, the cycle of buying and discarding is perpetuated by manufacturers who often release upgraded models annually. This creates the perception that newer is always better. Marketing campaigns push this narrative further, promoting the idea that the latest technology is not just desirable, but necessary.

This culture of disposability has led to what sociologists refer to as the "throw-away society." In Fiji, the impact of this mentality is evident as consumers are increasingly lured by the appeal of the latest electronic devices. While there is a growing middle class, there is also pressure to keep up with global trends, with social media playing a pivotal role in influencing purchasing habits. The desire for the latest phone, tablet, or gadget is not just about functionality but also about status and modernity.

Unfortunately, once these products become obsolete or break down, many Fijians are left with limited options for responsible disposal. Repair shops are scarce, and repair costs can be prohibitive, often surpassing the price of a new device. As a result, consumers opt to replace their gadgets rather than repair them, contributing to the mounting E-waste problem.

Market Forces: The Push for the Latest and Greatest

The market plays a significant role in fueling E-waste generation. Companies have perfected the art of planned obsolescence, designing products with short lifespans and limited repair

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options. This forces consumers to buy newer models as older ones become incompatible with software updates or parts are no longer available. Additionally, product warranties often expire just as devices start to show signs of wear and tear, leaving consumers with little choice but to purchase replacements.

Marketing strategies target consumers' emotions, creating a sense of urgency to own the latest technology. In Fiji, as in many other countries, this is evident in the telecommunications industry, where smartphone companies constantly push newer models, touting minor upgrades as revolutionary. With telecom providers offering installment plans, even those who may not have the financial means to buy expensive devices outright can still participate in this cycle of consumption.

However, what is often overlooked is the environmental cost of this relentless drive for new products. Every device comes with a hidden footprint: the energy and resources used in production, transportation, and disposal. E-waste is not just an issue of disposal but also one of unsustainable production and consumption patterns.

The Role of Consumers in Reducing E-Waste

As consumers, we hold significant power in addressing the E-waste crisis. Every purchase decision we make has a ripple effect on the environment. In Fiji, there is a growing awareness of the need for sustainable consumption, but there is also a long way to go in shifting consumer behaviour.

One of the most effective ways to reduce E-waste is to rethink our consumption habits. This includes opting to repair rather than replace devices, buying second-hand electronics, or supporting companies that offer longer-lasting products with repairable parts. Consumers can also demand better recycling facilities and take-back programs from manufacturers and retailers.

Moreover, education plays a critical role in changing consumer behavior. Schools, community groups, and local governments should work together to raise awareness about the environmental impact of E-waste and promote responsible consumption. By encouraging the public to think critically about their purchases and consider the environmental consequences, Fiji can take meaningful steps toward reducing its E-waste footprint.

Conclusion

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Green Action Week presents an opportunity for Fijians to reflect on their consumption patterns and the environmental impact of their choices. E-waste is a growing problem that requires collective action from consumers, businesses, and policymakers. By fostering a culture of repair, reuse, and responsible disposal, we can begin to address the E-waste crisis and move toward a more sustainable future.

As Fiji continues to develop and embrace new technologies, it is crucial that the nation also adopts sustainable practices to manage the waste these advancements generate. The "throw-away" culture that pervades much of the world can be countered by fostering awareness and implementing policies that prioritize environmental protection. The time to act is now.

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