# Title: "Waste not, want not: Where did that old cell phone go, anyway?"

E-Waste in China

## Short description

Have you ever wondered where your old cell phone, PlayStation, mp3 player, or other gadget went after you discarded it?

You may not know it, but a lot of our electronic waste, or e-waste, actually gets sent to other countries around the world and interestingly, a lot of it ends up back where it was produced. That's right, in China. As we were enjoying the train ride between Shenzhen and Shanghai, China (the last on our journey around the world), we happened to pass right by Guiyu, which made the Guinness Book of World Records in 2013 as the world's largest e-waste site. Back in 2005 more than 100 truckloads of e-waste were arriving there each day! The things that end up here in most cases either get recycled or (if useless) remain here, slowly polluting the people and environment around it. Recycling sounds nice, but when we heard about the terrible conditions in which our electronics get taken apart to obtain some of the precious raw materials and parts in them, we couldn't believe what we were reading.

This is what we found online – and it wouldn't surprise us if you find even more:

- Check out Guiyu on Wikipedia.
- Watch the short documentary by the Basel Action Network entitled Exporting Harm: The High-Tech Trashing of Asia (2005)
- Watch Following The Trail Of Toxic E-Waste (2008), a CBS 60 Minutes report that also stops in Guiyu.
- Check out this article by YES! Magazine about e-waste. Guiyu is mentioned specifically in this infographic.
- According to the British newspaper The Guardian, Agbogbloshie, Ghana is now the world's largest e-waste dump site. Check out the article, plus photos, here.
- Find out more about why we have this big mess in The Story of Electronics (video)
- Check out the Basel Action Network homepage to find more information about the issue and what is being done to improve things. Their 'library' (link on the left-hand side) has tons of information. You can find them here: www.ban.org

## Concrete challenge and tasks

Since the school year is almost over, but we really want to talk with you about this issue, we thought we'd squeeze in one more small challenge that we can only solve together.

It's simple: Since you are a good sample of your countries, we would like to do a similar survey with you as we did around X-mas when we wanted to know more about where your stuff comes from. Back then you gave us a pretty good idea about where the stuff is produced that we buy in the US and Europe! Now we have some questions about what you do with your stuff (this time your electronic stuff) when you don't need or want it anymore or it's broken:

1. What was the last piece of electronics that you got rid of (excluding anything lost)?
2. How long ago did you get rid of it?
3. Why did you get rid of it (broke, boring, got something better/newer, etc.)?
4. How did you dispose of it? Did you throw it in the garbage, send it back to the company who made it (is that possible in your country?), give it to a friend, or did you do something else (maybe you're building a cell phone sculpture in your garage)?
5. How long do you think a piece of electronics should last on average?

| Age group |
| --- |
| *16-18 years old* |

| **Duration** |
| --- |
| *~1 hour (in school)* |
| *More time as necessary.* |

**Topic area(s)**

*(select one or more of the following)*

- Biodiversity & Agriculture
- Climate
- Education
- Energy
- **Governance X**
- Mobility
- **Social X**
- Sustainable economics
- **Resources X**

**Methods used**

*Our suggestion: Individuals write down their answers to the questions and then discuss them together in a group, or groups. Document results to be discussed with Matt and Valentina at the end of May!*

**Appropriate for the following school subjects**

*Economics, social studies, environment & society, sciences*

**Required materials**

*Internet, pencil/pen, paper*

Check out the links above and discuss these questions in a group or in groups. We can't wait to learn about what you discussed! If you're feeling extra motivated, it would be super interesting to hear how your parents or grandparents would answer the same questions. We bet their answers will be different from yours!

**Skills and learning objectives: Critical thinking**
- You should know what e-waste is and understand how it differs from other kinds of waste
- You should be able to describe the life-cycle of a piece of electronics
- You should be able to name several environmental and social issues that are associated with the disposal of electronics.
- You should be able to name several ways that you can personally influence the impact of electronics on people and the environment (from your purchase, use, and disposal of devices to using your voice as a citizen and consumer).

**Connection to the curriculum**
- Economics and labor rights
- Natural and human resources
- Environment and society
- Social studies and world history

**Further references**
Next time one of your gadgets is broken, try getting it fixed or – if it can't be fixed – have it recycled responsibly, often free of charge! Here are some links to help get you started:

- E-Cycle Washington
- Reparatur- und Service Zentrum (RUSZ), Vienna
- PC Recycle and Repair, Puget Sound
- Demontage- und Recycling Zentrum (DRZ), Vienna

**Deadline for responses**
22 May 2015: We look forward to discussing your results with you soon in your class!