Minimising the creation of waste and waste disposal

(September 2021)

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The whoosh of water sliding by the hull… the gentle rock of a quiet harbour… the smell of garbage fermenting in the galley bin. Romance shattered! Here are tips to manage rubbish responsibly while cruising.

What to expect

Don't Count On Recycling. This did not reliably exist in most countries along our circumnavigation route. Minimizing packaging is never wrong! Grow practiced at refusing, reducing, and reusing before you depart.

Only Organics Overboard. Even then, with care. You can't toss that apple core over just anywhere: it may be rude (washed up on a beach), it may be illegal (be informed!), and it's often slow to decompose. Only in international waters (12+ miles offshore) is it no longer necessary to grind food waste into small pieces.

International waters: of course plastics should never go over, did you know that "glass, metal, bottles, crockery and similar refuse" is also always prohibited by MARPOL discharge provisions? If you can pack it on – stow it until there's a proper disposal option.

LINKS:
US federal regulations are detailed in this USCG boater's guide.
MARPOL discharge provisions can be downloaded here.
Soft-plastic technique method and more from Sailing Totem's garbage guide

Tips on Board

- Keep it Clean: that aluminium can you won't toss over just needs to be cleaned and stored until it can be properly disposed, and a bucket of seawater gets it done easily.

- Cut It Up: soft plastics can be put into a larger bottle with a lid (maybe a juice jug you're waiting to dispose of) and compact astonishingly well.

- No Plastic Over, Ever: it hides in packaging like cans (plastic liner isn't visible to your eye) and tetra packs (may be visible when torn)? These should never be put overboard.

- Beware The Burn: Beach burns are a tempting way to deal with waste when you don't have options. But the relatively low temperatures of beach fires create toxic emissions, and not just from plastics.