

The Courtesy of the Philosopher

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As José Ortega y Gasset said, ‘clarity is the courtesy of the philosopher.’

In the current era, the compartmentalization of knowledge and extreme specialization have led us to a Babel in which the jargon of specialists hinders understanding of technologies by people not immersed in emerging fields. This has the paradoxical result that misinformation on subjects such as waste management, often fuelled by amateur discussions on social media (posing as expert opinions), is becoming more widespread.

Environmental experts within industry, including waste management professionals, are no exception. As such, in this issue of *Waste Management & Research* that you hold in your hands, we present many ideas, methodological syntheses and possible developments for digestion by people who today are only seeking end-of-pipeline solutions instead of dedicating their efforts to curtailing if not stopping waste generation in the first place. For instance, it is laudable to seek methods of collecting plastic wastes already accumulating in our oceans, but that might be considered a Homeric task compared to the more effective and ultimately more practical solution of ending the release of plastics into the environment.

As waste management specialists, we have a huge responsibility to inform the rest of society of the importance of best practices and to explain the solutions we can provide. Therefore, the idea of sharing experiences and possible applications has to reach a communicative clarity that can influence citizens, interest the media and energize politicians and legislators into action.

Otherwise, efforts to protect our environment in the face of increasing population and consumption tend to encourage emotional appeals by well-meaning, but typically poorly informed citizen-prophets. All too often are good-sounding, but impractical and too-costly ideas adopted by responsible institutions that crowd out practical solutions, saddling society with merely symbolic regulations and actions. Scattered beach-cleaning initiatives have to be applauded since they carry a very important educational message and attract the attention of the media, but again, the real focus must be on ‘simply’ tackling the problem at the source; i.e. reducing solid waste generation.

To this end, there is no doubt that prevention must sit at the top of any waste management hierarchy, but this cannot be used as an excuse to delay or even avoid the construction of a proper waste treatment infrastructure as long as wastes are indeed being generated in our communities. Waste can be and often is in fact both (a) a source of raw materials for industry, and (b) energy that must be integrated with other economic activities. With a proper and advanced waste management system, positive impacts on the

environment can be achieved, contributing to a decrease in greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, the waste sector will play a crucial role in the wider circular economy paradigm, supporting and driving all efforts towards better product design in terms of reusability and recycling, after the consumer deems the original products no longer usable.

For ISWA’s World Congress in Bilbao, ATEGRUS (Asociación Técnica para la Gestión de Residuos y Medio Ambiente) and ISWA have introduced a practice of using more inclusive terms. For example, instead of the traditional landfill, recycling or waste-to-energy topics, the Congress has been structured around more mainstream and trending issues.

The Congress articulates the conference contents around the following four main topics:

- Sustainable cities;
- Social innovation;
- Climate change;
- Marine litter.

This conference structure was adopted to inherently explain how our activities are closely interconnected with other sectors of the economy and society at large, and how they can contribute to mitigate some of the major environmental problems we face. Of course, specialized content such as the article in this issue about leachate management procedures will be discussed, but the Congress is also a forum to involve producers of consumer goods who are trying to figure out how to recover value in their manufacturing supply chain, and how to minimize the generation of waste at every step in the life of their products.

Basque people have a long history of dealing with scarcity and management of resources. They are probably one of the oldest cultures in Europe, preserving the only non-Indo-European language in the EU. The Basque Country has strong links with the sea. Indeed, this year is the 500th anniversary of the Ferdinand Magellan expedition (the first circumnavigation of the globe), a major milestone in world history. One of the expedition’s few surviving boats was sailed back to Spain by Juan Sebastián Elcano, who was born near Bilbao.

From the 19th century onwards, Bilbao was an iron mining and manufacturing city, well known for shipbuilding. Like many other cities, it was affected by the major economic crises in the 1970s and 1980s. Since then, it has emerged as a centre of intellectual and highly skilled industries, greatly influencing the development of information and technology and other advanced services. Bilbao’s

ISWA World Congress in 2019 will showcase the fourth industrial revolution driven by networking and the availability of Big Data that is processed into valuable information, thanks to the increasing power of machine learning (artificial intelligence).

In this spirit, this special issue of *Waste Management & Research* contains a series of selected papers that cover all four main topics of this year's conference. Among them, we have included two review papers that allow us to gather state of the art information on the mainstream plastic waste issue from two points of view: the methodologies used to assess the biodegradation of bioplastics under aerobic and anaerobic conditions, and the impact of marine litter and of the global initiatives currently in place to tackle it. A third review is devoted to the evergreen topic of the risks poised to the environmental and human health by waste incineration. Waste combustion is also the topic of an interesting

paper on the fate of nano titanium dioxide. Biological processes are covered in terms of the assessment of compost stability and maturity, as well as that of co-digestion of different waste streams. Finally, the toxic potential of leachate generated from healthcare waste disposal is addressed, as well as non-conventional stabilisation/solidification treatment of industrial wastes. As a journal dedicated to providing a know-how platform for scientists, practitioners and public bodies, we are happy to provide you with this collection of papers that will serve to enhance clarity in the current discussion in the waste management field.

On behalf of the Organising Committee, we welcome you to the ISWA 2019 World Congress in Bilbao and trust that the topics covered in this Special Issue of *Waste Management & Research* will inspire your research and your broader activities in the waste management sector.



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