

China's plan to stop recycling the world's rubbish

[By Andy Coghlan, *New Scientist*, Jan 3, 2018](#)

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FORGETTING to put the bins out is one thing, but this is a whole other recycling disaster. Monday saw the notional start of China's ban on waste imports, which is threatening to cause global panic, because the nation is the world's largest recycler of scrap metals, plastic and paper.

It's not that we weren't warned. Last July, China declared that it was no longer willing to accept *yang laji*, or "[foreign garbage](#)", from 1 January 2018. It [notified the World Trade Organization \(WTO\)](#) of its plan to ban the import of 24 types of scrap, including plastics for recycling, waste textile materials and all unsorted waste paper — basically the sort of paper that accumulates in household bins. Likewise, imports of cardboard for recycling must be much "cleaner" and free of gravel, dust and stones.

So where will this mountain of waste go instead? And it really is a mountain — [China and Hong Kong imported 70 per cent of the world's plastic waste in 2016](#).

Frantic negotiations are still under way between Chinese authorities and Western exporters of the banned waste, who want to try to agree a much longer transition. The WTO and exporting countries have appealed for a five-year transitional period.

China has so far agreed a grace period, [delaying enforcement of the ban until 1 March](#). But there are some glimmers of hope that a backlash from Chinese companies equally affected by the ban might add domestic pressure for a calmer transition.

The biggest piles of newly orphaned waste are plastics and mixed paper waste — things like food packaging and newspapers. In 2016, the US alone sent China 13.2 million tonnes of scrap paper and 775,000 tonnes of plastics scrap, says Mark Carpenter of the [US Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries](#).

Much of this mixed paper — along with cardboard itself — gets converted within China into cardboard boxes and packaging for dispatching Chinese-made goods to domestic and Western customers — a neat cycle of global reuse. But there are reports since the July announcement that the [ban is already biting](#), leading to shortages of cardboard.

"Chinese companies are already running out of cardboard boxes," says Simon Ellin, chief executive of the [UK Recycling Association](#). "Alibaba, the Chinese equivalent of Amazon, is having to import cardboard boxes instead from countries like Vietnam."

Ellin says that confusion over China's demand for cleaner cardboard is also contributing to the shortage, as some exporters are withholding cargoes in case they get turned back for being too dirty. "It's a big risk to a business if you don't know what happens when it gets there," he says.

Ellin suspects that the recipient companies in Chinese ports are equally unhappy with the speed of the transition. “They are not ready for increased inspections, spelling chaos at the ports, with containers of waste backed up like traffic jams,” he says. “I think the impact of the whole strategy on China itself can’t be underestimated.”

Precisely for that reason — to avoid harming its own economy — Ellin is hopeful that China will eventually agree to a more measured and pragmatic transition. Otherwise, Westerners better hope that local recycling firms can rapidly fill the void, before the plastic begins to pile up.