We'll have to reduce recycling you know. In order to save resources [1]

Written by **Tim Worstall** [2] | Tuesday 25 December 2012

I thought this was a fun little finding. And it leads to the conclusion that we'll have to stop people recycling things. In order to save those precious natural resources. Via Mike Munger comes this [3]:

> Abstract: In this study, we propose that the ability to recycle may lead to increased resource usage compared to when a recycling option is not available. Supporting this hypothesis, our first experiment shows that consumers used more paper while evaluating a pair of scissors when the option to recycle was provided (vs. not provided). In a follow-up field experiment, we find that the per person restroom paper hand towel usage increased after the introduction of a recycling bin compared to when a recycling option was not available.

Essentially, the finding is that Jevon's Paradox works in reverse as well. Jevon's is the idea that making more efficient use of a resource doesn't necessarily mean using less of that resource. Some on the wilder shores say that it never does but it's not that prescriptive.

For example, if we make more efficient use of electricity to make light, does that mean that we'll end up using less electricity to make light? Not necessarily. Making light cheaper might mean that we simply use more of it. And that might mean that we could use less electricity overall, the same amount of even more. Light being a reasonable example as per lumen artificial light has declined in price by several orders of magnitude over the centuries. Yet it appears that we're all still using 0.7% of our incomes to provide it. One of the odder straight lines that people have found in such researches.

This paper here seems to be telling us much the same thing about recycling. When people think that paper towels will not be recycled they use x amount of them. When they think they will be they use x + y amount of them. Recycling thus increases the usage of paper towels. Now, we might argue that as the paper towels are indeed recycled then of course resource usage declines. But this isn't actually so: recycling paper quite famously causes more resource use than cutting down (and of course planting) a few more trees. This is why recycled toilet paper [4] (erm, no, that toilet paper made from recycled paper, not actual recycled toilet paper) appears to cost more than virgin.

So, an interesting thought for the lead up to the new year. Save the planet's precious resources by recycling less. For Jevon's Paradox does indeed reverse.

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