The solution to the plastic waste crisis? It isn't recycling

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There's no way of making current levels of consumption 'environmentally friendly'
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'Streets full of secondhand shops depress some people, but in an ecologically literate world they should be seen as pioneers.'

The Lego Disney Frozen II Arendelle Castle Village features a princess, animals, birds and mini dolls. It is made of 521 separate bits of plastic, it was one of the bestselling Christmas toys, and fans of the movie will surely spend several hours of magical, creative play.

But those few hours may well be the last that this and many other toys are used. Thousands of plastic castles, farmyards and games, as well as myriad other presents, have probably already been stuffed into bulging cupboards to be thrown away in a year or two to make room for yet more plastic. And, because most plastic is near impossible to recycle, these toys will probably have to be landfilled or burned in incinerators, poisoning the air and further adding to global heating.

But would it really make much difference if the castle, and the 359m tonnes of plastic that the world makes a year, was recyclable? Is the type of plastic the problem, or is it the fact that we are overwhelmed with vast quantities of waste we cannot process?

The question is barely raised by the Green Alliance, whose new report, paid for by some of Britain's biggest plastic recyclers, laments that people are confused about what can be recycled or composted. Companies, say the report's authors, want to use less plastic but they may be increasing our carbon footprints by switching their packaging to glass or cardboard, which have their own environmental impacts. Glass, they point out, is heavier to transport so can increase carbon emissions, and paper bags may not be reusable.

Telling people what they can throw out and recycle is important, but corporations and governments that are in the business of growth do not want to address the real problem: the vast and escalating quantity of plastic and other stuff that people buy, use a bit and then throw away. Along with celebrities, "influencers" and PR companies, they seek to create needs for things we never knew we wanted, and

then manipulate us to buy more of everything. Bombarded by advertisements, we are then persuaded that the more we binge-shop, the more fulfilling and satisfying our lives will be.

Industries respond that some recycling rates are increasing and that targets are being met, but the fact is we are burning more fossil fuels than ever to make and then dispose of things that we just do not need. Shopping is now equated with fun and fulfilment, our public holidays have been turned into buying fests, high-street health is measured in sales, and the bosses of chain stores stand down if people don't buy more new stuff from them each year.

Supermarkets switching from one sort of packaging to another may prevent plastics from getting into the sea or being burned but this is not nearly enough. The way to avoid ecological disaster is to starve the beast of consumerism, by buying less and reusing more of everything. Rather than blame meat or toy castles or aeroplane flights, we must change consumer habits and attitudes to consumption.

The plastic-makers and supermarkets are rightly held to account. But it is the voracious "take-make-dispose" industrial model that has been identified by people such as former sailor Ellen MacArthur that is the real culprit. Her foundation argues that the plastic waste crisis is just the symptom of a single-use culture and that plastics should never become waste. It calls for a circular economy based on the principles of designing out waste and pollution by keeping products and materials in use.

Can consumption ever be contained? Easily. Stuff can be designed better to last longer; food chains and toy makers don't have to make poor quality goods; producers can use fewer raw materials; waste can be made a resource; the circular economy can be developed. Tax can make corporations more responsible; excess can be discouraged in schools and homes; identities do not have to be based on how much we buy.

There is real hope, too. The secondhand economy of "pre-loved" goods is bigger in Britain than in any other OECD country, with charity shops and boot sales generating more than £700m. It is the antidote to the throwaway corporate culture and the chain stores, which take money out of the local communities.

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