



Zero-Waste Bloggers: The Millennials Who Can Fit a Year's Worth of Trash in a Jar

By Leilani Clark, The Guardian, Apr. 22, 2018

Kathryn Kellogg, a 25-year-old print shop employee, spends four hours a day on her lifestyle blog Going Zero Waste. She posts on Instagram, engages with Facebook followers, and writes about homemade eyeliner and lip balm, worm composting, and shopping bulk bins – anything to avoid unnecessary waste. Her trash for the past year – anything that hasn't been composted or recycled – fits in an 8oz jar.

Kellogg is earnest, enthusiastic, and admittedly still figuring out what it means to be zero waste. The aspiring actor has also weathered her fair share of criticism. "I'm not even that big yet and I get so much hate mail," says Kellogg, who draws 10,000 unique page views a month and has 800 subscribers.



Photo: Andrew Burton

Since the launch of Going Zero Waste in March 2015, she's been criticized on social media and in private messages for driving and flying, for not installing a grey-water system, and, no joke, for using toilet paper (she does have a bidet, by the way). She's been chastised by vegans for eating eggs, and one visiting relative walked around Kellogg's house pointing out anything made of plastic.

She's also been called out as overly privileged, even though she lives in a modest two-bedroom house in Vallejo, a blue-collar city 32 miles north-east of San Francisco.

"They just nitpick every little thing because zero waste sounds like such an ultimatum," Kellogg says. "My boyfriend thinks that I should change the term, but it's there, and I don't know what else to call it."

The leaders of this zero-waste lifestyle movement are young millennial women like Lauren Singer of Trash is for Tossers, Celia Ristow of Litterless, and Kellogg. They all embrace a sleek, modern aesthetic over the crunchy, hippy stereotypes of yore.

Most of these women trace their lightning bolt moment back to Bea Johnson, a charismatic, 42-year-old mother of two from the wealthy enclave of Mill Valley, California. Outspoken, French and with a taste for a stark minimalist aesthetic, Johnson solidified her status as a zero-waste lifestyle guru in 2013 with the publication of *Zero Waste Home: The Ultimate Guide to Reducing Your Waste*.

Ariana Schwarz, 27, runs the Paris-to-Go zero waste blog. As a sustainability major, Schwarz was frustrated by the focus on theory over meaningful lifestyle changes. Then, her geology professor sent her a copy of a *Sunset* magazine feature about Johnson and her 16oz jar of trash. "Here was a woman actually living as sustainably as possible," Schwarz says. Inspired, she completed a school project, living zero waste for a month, then three months, and then a year. "Once I realized how easy it was, it kind of stuck with me."



These young women aim to reduce their landfill trash at a time in history when, on average, every American produces nearly three pounds of trash per day. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, 40% of US greenhouse gas emissions come from hauling, making, using, and throwing away stuff and food.

On a drizzly, grey day back at the Vallejo farmers' market, Kellogg shows off zero-waste grocery shopping in action. She dumps organic strawberries from the plastic trays into her own jar (after asking the stand worker whether he would reuse the container). She uses cloth produce bags for shelled peas, kale and raisins. She orders cheese in reusable glass containers from a local goat farmer. Kellogg says she aspires to be a "strong, moderate voice" for the zero-waste lifestyle, which she discovered after health issues pushed her towards a more natural lifestyle.

"Anyone can participate in waste reduction practices," Kellogg says. "I'm from Arkansas; I know that I'm so fortunate to live in California. None of this stuff – bulk stores, recycling programs, municipal composting – exists back home in the south. But I think absolutely anyone can participate, it's to what degree they can."

Rob Greenfield, 29, wrote *Dude Making a Difference* about his zero-waste journey across the US on a bamboo bicycle. He agrees that any effort counts, even if it's not as extreme as his own. He's also one of the few male zero-waste bloggers around.

Greenfield admits, so far in his travels, he's only come across female zero-waste bloggers. "I don't really know why that is," Greenfield says. "But I don't feel isolated by it because it doesn't matter to me whether my comrades are male or female. I find great joy and passion in my work."

It's no coincidence that young women are leading the movement, says Kate Bailey, program manager at Eco-Cycle Solutions, a not-for-profit group that provides recycling and composting services in Boulder, Colorado.

"Women everywhere are deeply concerned about the health effects of the growing amount of chemicals and toxins in our everyday lives," Bailey says. "Women are also the primary purchasers in the household so they are on the frontlines of hyper-consumption in the US. They're frustrated by the growing prevalence of single-use, disposable products, the trend to over-package everything, and the lack of choices when it comes to sustainable, less toxic products."

Celia Ristow, a 24-year-old tech company worker who started the blog *Litterless*, gives smartly written tips for minimizing waste when traveling, eating out, and in the domestic sphere. Unlike other zero-waste bloggers, she doesn't track her trash in a jar. It's misleading, Ristow says, and doesn't take into account the fact that trash often accumulates in the production stream before products end up on store shelves.

Ristow admits that she'll probably never be completely zero waste, but that doesn't stop her from striving to produce as little trash as possible. She thinks of it as a daily lifestyle choice, a way of finding



no-waste solutions to small decisions. Refusing samples in plastic cups. Saying no to the granola bar in non-recyclable packaging on the snack table at work. Bringing along a reusable water bottle – always.

Living in an apartment in Chicago does make taking the zero-waste route easier than it might be for, say, a family of six in rural Illinois. A composting service picks up Ristow's food scraps each month. She buys shampoo, conditioner, bar soap and lotion in bulk at a local store. For clothes, she shops second-hand and doesn't buy anything with packaging. Food is the easiest to procure, with a wealth of farmers' markets and specialty grocery stores. She also takes advantage of an excellent city public transportation system.

Though Ristow has eliminated disposable products from her daily life, she admits that as one of 7 billion people on the planet, those actions have a microscopic effect on greenhouse gas emissions, at best. But, these choices are also the best way she's found to individually combat climate change and live by her values.

"I can't, and don't want, to control what other people do," she says. "I can only change my own actions. I support stores that sell bulk, zero-waste food. I buy from smaller companies that make sustainable, compostable, zero-waste home and hygiene goods. To the people around me, I'm modeling what small daily actions can look like."

Personal efforts to reduce waste should be applauded, says Dr Daniel Kammen, professor of energy at UC Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy. "Seeing [zero waste] become part of the social dialogue is a wonderful first step," he adds. Yet, in reality, it can be a challenge to quantify just how much reduction is actually happening, since "waste lurks in many corners".

To that end, he and his students built a calculator to help people track their personal and household waste. To make true inroads on waste, according to experts, we'll need stronger pricing of waste, attention to behavior science, and rewards from the public and private sector for low-waste lifestyles.

In the meantime, zero-waste devotees are "first-movers" and "latter-day Thoreaus", says Edward Humes, who profiled Johnson's work in his 2012 book *Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash*. "Their neighbors may look at them askance, perhaps, or as extremists," Humes says. "The early adopters of rooftop solar power a few decades ago were viewed in the same way. Now they look like visionaries. I think the zero-waste-istas are in a similar place, showing the rest of us what's possible, spreading the word. Ten years from now, they will seem much more mainstream."