

COMMENT

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Groaning under the growing weight of a global problem

We all have too much stuff, but how do we get off the treadmill asks **DICK LUMSDEN**

■ Does your garage look like this? Dick Lumsden's does.

Photo: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO/RALK BROSKVAR

I read an absolutely mind-boggling statistic last week, which – if true – goes a long way towards explaining why our planet is starting to strain at the seams.

According to the Los Angeles Times, the average American household now contains more than 300,000 items. No, that isn't a typing error...that is three hundred thousand items.

At first I dismissed it as another scaremongering statistic dredged up by someone asking a few random questions and multiplying the answers by the age of the household cat.

But as I sat here typing, and looking at my own desk, if you count pens, pencils, paperclips, memory sticks, stapler, keyboard, mouse, laptop, monitor, coffee mug, Ipswich Town coasters, notebooks, phone(s), business cards and hundreds of pieces of paper filed in an apparently random series of piles, this one little corner of my own home was doing its best to live up to American standards.

And as I looked around the room, with its cupboards and groaning shelves, then at the rest of the house with cupboards and drawers full of stuff which has been around for years. I started to believe this staggering fact might be true, and not just in America, but all over the developed world.

A little bit more digging around the topic unearthed another startling fact. In addition to accumulating such a huge amount of clutter (and apparently never getting rid of it) each of us produces, on average, just over 4lbs of waste each and every day – according to researchers at the Duke University Center for Sustainability. That is three times more than we were producing in 1960.

If I live to be 80, that would mean almost 650 times my own weight.

There are close to 7 billion people on the planet. Let's say the average adult weight (offsetting western obesity with third world poverty and famine,) is around nine stone. The combined weight of human flesh bouncing around at any one time is

just under 394 million tons.

Multiply that by 650 over the next generation or so and poor old Earth will be dangerously close to slingshotting out of orbit as the weight gets heavier and heavier.

I don't consider myself to be a hoarder. I don't go to bed at night through a tunnel of old newspapers and cereal boxes. In fact, if anything, I would say that Mrs Lumsden and I are pretty good at recycling the clutter.

We regularly have a clear out of wardrobes and drawers to give second hand clothes to charity shops. We dutifully visit the recycling centre in Lawford every week or so with bottles, cardboard and other bits and pieces. Yet still we have too much stuff.

There are three very easy ways to tell if you have too much stuff, and we account for all of them. Firstly, I can't get my car in the garage. Secondly, in every room in the

house, the floor doubles up as an open air cupboard. And thirdly, we are continually buying more stuff like containers, bags and wall tidies to hold the stuff we already have.

Something has to give. Not just at Lumsden Towers, but all over the world. Hundreds of millions of tons of waste and unwanted items each year are being burned, buried or simply just piling up in people's houses.

But we are on a treadmill here. If we stop buying things, then businesses will crash and economies will be ruined. If we continue to buy and replace (or keep the old stuff) we are, quite literally, piling up problems for the future.

Maybe the solution is to do on a global scale what I'm sure most of us do on a domestic scale. When one room gets too full, the overspill finds its way into other corners.

There are a few companies now which are developing ways to

recycle old plastic into bricks, a bit like Lego, to create housing in areas of the world where it is desperately needed.

Let's have more of this to get rid of the plastic and build homes in Africa or Asia or South America where they are needed. And let's ship all our old furniture and knick-knacks out along with them.

There must be people in the world for whom a plastic house, a set of mismatched chairs and an old rug would be a massive step up from what they currently have.

And just maybe, if we spread the weight of all the stuff, we can keep Earth in its orbit for a few years longer.

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