

The ACU Sustainability Guide to Disposable Coffee Cups

What's the deal with disposable coffee cups?

Students and staff at ACU have made a serious commitment to drinking coffee. We love it, and for most us, it's fair to say that study or work has to wait until we've had that first coffee. That cycle then repeats itself, several times a day.

And although we don't know just how much coffee is consumed at ACU, we have a very good idea about how many disposable coffee cups our students and staff burn through in a year.

That number is 300,000 *at least*.

We know this because of the number of coffee cups we've counted in our waste bins during waste-audits at every campus.

Now let's be clear: disposable coffee cups cannot be recycled.

This means that our consumption and waste of disposable coffee cups is an ugly environmental problem, and it's one entirely of our own making and it's up to us to solve.

To better understand all of this, let's first look at why disposable cups are a problem and then at some of the ways that we can reduce the size of the problems they create.



Our mutual friend, coffee

The Dirty **5** Secrets of Disposable Cups



Disposable cups are made from natural resources like trees and fossil fuels and the process of logging the forests and powering the factories damages habitats and generates pollution – and all for a product with a useful life of perhaps ten minutes, tops



To reach consumers, we pack disposable coffee cups into a vehicle, plane or boat and send them often long distances to cafes. That distribution entails yet more pollution before it's even used.



Disposable coffee cups can't be recycled because of the plastic liner inside the layers of cardboard that you can see. For more detail on this, see the image on page 3, below.



When there are too many disposable cups in a recycling bin they can contaminate entire loads of recycling, all of which is then sent to landfill.



When disposable cups end up in a landfill they rot like any other organic material, and because this occurs deep in a compacted pile of rubbish the decomposition process is anaerobic (i.e. without oxygen). This is significant because anaerobic decomposition generates methane, a greenhouse gas at least 20 times more powerful than Carbon Dioxide.

Disposable Cups Dissected

Plastic Lid

These are the only part of take-away cups that are recyclable, so put it in the recycling bin. Even better, let the barista know that you don't want a lid.



Paper inner and outer layers

Disposable cups have an inner, middle and outer layer. The inner and outer layers are made from new – not recycled – paper pulp. New paper pulp is necessary to meet hygiene standards, but it only adds to the heavy environmental impact of disposable cups.

Plastic liner, middle layer

The middle layer of the cup – which you can't see unless you cut a cup open – is usually made of a plastic called polyethylene. By itself, it's fully recyclable but in the case of a disposable cup, it's bonded to the cup's inner and outer cardboard layers and can't be efficiently and economically separated in a recycling facility. For this reason, it's fair to say that disposable cups are designed specifically to be thrown into landfill.

Solutions



Give up coffee.

Just joking! Seriously now:



Use a ceramic cup

This can take a couple of forms.

- Ask the cafe to serve your coffee in a ceramic cup that they provide
- Take your own ceramic cup to the cafe. If you're a staff member or a higher degree student, you almost certainly have access to a staff kitchen that contains dozens of ceramic cups accumulated over years. Take one to the cafe and ask them to use it instead of a disposable cup.



Bring a reusable cup

There are lots of reusable cups out there, with many kinds of styles sold at a range of prices. Do choose carefully though, because the reusable cups on the market vary in robustness, safety and ease of cleaning, for instance.



Send a (market) signal

Buy your coffee from cafés that serve coffee in ceramic cups or that offer a discount for customers who bring their own reusable cup. A number of cafés at ACU will offer a discount in these circumstances, even if they don't advertise the fact, so make sure that you ask them whether they offer a discount.