Incineration is not recycling

Burning plastic waste won't solve our pollution problems

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The Problem with Incineration

As global attention focuses on plastic pollution and marine litter, industry groups are making an effort to appear on board. Some are, but there is a difference between what some groups actually want and what is needed to address the problem. For example, some industry groups have been championing the idea of 100 per cent plastics "recovery", but recovery is just another word for incineration, and incineration a) promotes waste generation and b) isn't part of a circular economy.

Industries and governments that are supportive of incineration state that energy can be captured by incinerating waste materials (energy-from-waste, EfW), and that incineration should be preferable to landfill. But incineration is just a tweak to the existing linear consumption model, where products are manufactured, serve a brief purpose, and are then discarded forever (in landfills or incinerators). Instead, businesses and government should be moving toward circularity, where discarded materials are used to manufacture new products.

Incineration promotes waste generation

- EfW requires expensive purpose-built power generators, creating a need for a steady supply of plastic to feed them and disincentivizing waste reduction.
- When plastics are burned, the polymers from which they were created are no longer available to make new plastic products, meaning more virgin materials are needed.
- Incineration is expensive, and displaces investments in permanent solutions directed towards reducing, reusing and recycling plastic waste.

Incineration is not consistent with a circular economy

In nature nothing is wasted. Bacteria and fungi consume dead trees, and excrete nutrients which enrich the soil and feed future trees. When animals die they are eaten by other animals, bacteria and insects. The circular economy takes this natural principle and applies it to the way we design and produce products. Instead of trying to dispose of "waste", industry and government need to see it as an essential source of valuable resources to collect and use as materials for new products.

If we burn plastics, those materials are lost, and can no longer be used to manufacture new plastic goods.