

Are we going backwards in order to move forwards?

DISCUSS:

We live in a world in which modern technology can deliver our every whim, so news that milkmen and their retro glass-bottled goods are seeing a resurgence in the UK, coupled with the launch of old-school public drinking fountains in London, might have you wondering if we're heading in the wrong direction. Surely we should be looking forwards, not backwards, right?

It's easy to romanticise the 'old ways' of doing things. The likes of handwritten letters, lovingly knitted jumpers and 35mm film have an appeal that email, fast fashion and smartphone snaps never will. But when it comes to the environmental factors driving these seemingly 'backward steps', it's not just about rose-tinted spectacles; it's about a gradual, collective shift in our consciousness as consumers.


Thanks to documentaries such as *Blue Planet*, mainstream society is waking up to the idea that the Earth is in trouble, and that urgent action is needed. I spend a lot of time writing about technology and, yes, there's a lot of amazing innovation out there designed to help the cause, but the fact is that much of it isn't yet economically viable (like some kinds of renewables), needs to be refined (such as the now-abandoned refillable milk bags) or is simply out of the hands of the consumer (the average Joe doesn't get much say over the council's choice of waste-management provider, for example).

But the so-called 'old ways' are familiar. And they're easy – because, let's be honest, everyone wants to make a difference without making much effort. Thanks to the cyclical nature of just about everything, they're now hip, too. Take farmers' markets, for instance. They're no longer run-of-the-mill, transactional affairs; they've become community events with live music, a Facebook page and designer honey – and, according to the online property portal Zoopla, a 26 per cent price hike on houses nearby. And that's all underscored with a collective understanding that buying loose fruit and veg from a local farmer – albeit at a small premium – is better for the planet than going to a supermarket for a plastic-wrapped hand of bananas that have been flown in from South America (if only fruit could somehow evolve its own protective covering!).

'Community' is an important word here. In fact, it's one of the single most-cited reasons by milkmen for their recent comeback – on their daily rounds, they have traditionally played a reassuring role as the eyes and ears of a neighbourhood. It's also one of the drivers of the capital's new drinking fountains. Community groups and boroughs have been invited to apply for one of the first 20 and a successful bid will

demonstrate an area's commitment to those who live and/or work there.

Of course, there's always the chance that these eco-conscious values are born of 'virtue signalling' rather than genuine sentiment ('green' is a fashionable lifestyle, after all), but shift – regardless of its underlying motivator – is how change happens. Look at eggs. Most people knew those that derived from caged hens had a grim backstory but bought them anyway, usually because they were cheaper. But enough of us made sufficient noise about the plight of said hens and now there are few folk out there who'd proudly display a box of 'caged' eggs on their countertop.

Obviously, there are downsides: milk bottles frequently get nicked from front doorsteps, fare from farmers' markets is more expensive and drinking fountains will bear the brunt of drunken Saturday-night shenanigans. But these problems are not exclusive to the 21st century – they existed in the past, too, before we became so dependent on plastic and inured to wastefulness. And that's the payoff. 



Rachel England is an environment and technology writer, contributing to Vice and The Guardian



Illustrator JAMIE JONES