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What if you had somewhere quick and easy to put food waste, instead of being blamed for wasting it? Gary Perkin/Shutterstock

Campaigns urging us to ‘care more’ about food waste miss the point

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Environmental campaigns often appeal to our emotions: they ask us to care. They implore us to feel a sense of connection, empathy and stewardship, and then to alter our behaviour as a result.

In relation to food waste, this could mean anything from not pouring oil down the sink so as to protect ocean habitats, to keeping methane-emitting organic waste out of landfill.

About one-third of the world’s food goes to waste. We know that this squander is bad for social, economic and environmental reasons, yet still it happens.

But my recent research (publication pending) which looks at how food surplus is managed in homes, found that in many households, food wastage is not due to people being unthinking, unskilled or uncaring over-consumers. Instead, it is a product of our (largely reasonable) hierarchies of care: we actively prioritise the health and well-being of our family and friends.

For example, leftovers may go to waste because of health concerns about freezing and reheating certain foods, or the need to eat them within particular time frames. Many parents with young

Author



Bethaney Turner

Assistant Professor in International Studies, University of Canberra

children (in line with parenting and dietary advice) want to give their kids a wide variety of fresh, nutritious food. This means not feeding them the limp veggies lurking at the bottom of the crisper, and avoiding meat that may have crept past its use-by date.

As well as feeling a strong obligation to their family's immediate concerns, many people I survey and interview are frustrated by a lack of appropriate infrastructure to help keep food waste out of landfill. As a consequence, campaigns that focus on mobilising people to "care more" about the environment may actually be preventing – or at least limiting – the focus on more urgent problems.

Blame game

The implication that waste results from a lack of care reinforces a neoliberal approach that blames consumers. This is evident in the most well-known food waste reduction campaign, **Love Food Hate Waste (LFHW)**, which originated in Britain and has been imported to New South Wales and Victoria.

The NSW LFHW website implores us to care for food, in turn promising that we can "waste less food, save money and our environment". The suggested strategies include meal planning and leftover recipes. These could be useful for some people, but many consumers are already using these techniques. They know how to reuse food and consciously attempt to avoid overbuying.

In the few research studies that have looked in detail at the passage of food into and out of homes, all found that householders carefully **monitor** and **manage** fresh foods. Generally speaking, people aren't adding organic waste to landfill through a lack of care for the environment.

Many of my participants said they want to reduce waste but find it difficult to buy small amounts of fresh food from supermarkets, where such products are often pre-packaged. Many people were also concerned about over-packaged items, such as half a cauliflower wrapped in huge lengths of cling wrap.

Food enters the waste stream not because we don't care, but because we actively prioritise other things such as our family's health, and because of authorities' failure to provide infrastructure to address the problem.

A failure of infrastructure

While care for the environment is rarely front and centre in people's decision-making about food waste (being secondary to health considerations), my research suggests that people will happily use schemes to keep food waste out of landfill, as long as they are simple, efficient, and mess-free.

Such schemes could include regular collection of the waste by local councils, including provision of receptacles that fit into kitchens and minimise mess and smell through the use of biodegradable bags (as used in a recent successful trial by Lake Macquarie Council).

Community composting initiatives, commonly centred around community gardens, also have potential, as does the use of private companies, particularly for servicing businesses. In my work with

households involved in some of these initiatives, all were enthusiastic about having their food waste being repurposed into compost to nourish new life.

But most urban Australian households either can't or won't compost at home, and this is unlikely to change no matter how much we urge the public to care for the environment.

This illustrates why focusing solely on making people “care” is unlikely to reduce household food waste as much as we would like. Instead, we must reduce food waste in landfill by providing infrastructure that drives widespread behavioural change. Put simply, we need to expand our toolkit.

Many people already care about food waste, but they care about other things too, such as health and hygiene. By giving consumers a simple way to deal with food waste rather than throwing it into the bin, we can reduce landfill without asking people for unrealistic compromises about their food habits. To really drive behavioural change, perhaps what we need to promote is not care but the infrastructure that makes caring convenient.



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