

Why the Winner of the "Environmental Nobel Prize" Was Surprised:

"Korea Recycles Well, But..."

Rossano Ercolini, Pioneer of the Zero Waste Movement

"Separate collection instead of incineration" led to 82% recycling in just one year

"Repairing and reusing is more effective than recycling"

Only 16.4% of Korea's plastic waste becomes plastic again

"Corporations have the power to change the world... But consumers must demand it"

"This is my first visit to Korea, and I was surprised and pleased to see that even public trash bins on the streets are well sorted into cans, paper, plastic, etc., and that people seem very used to recycling."

"Using non-essential single-use plastic is foolish"

Although Korea is often considered a leading country in recycling, its per capita plastic waste in 2022 was 103.9 kg—more than double the OECD average of 44.2 kg across 30 member countries.

Ercolini stated that the first step to solving the issue of plastic pollution is to reduce the use of "foolish" single-use plastics. He said, "Whether in Korea or Italy, the lifestyle in large cities where takeout is common may be the problem," adding, "I'm not opposed to all plastic use, but considering that only 9% of plastic worldwide is recycled, using unnecessary single-use plastics is foolish."

The activist who led his hometown to a recycling rate of 86%

Ercolini is from Capannori, a small town in Tuscany, Italy, with a population of around 46,000. A former elementary school teacher, he raised awareness about the health risks of a planned local incinerator in the mid-1990s, successfully preventing its construction. In his school, he promoted paper recycling and replaced all disposable plastics in the cafeteria with reusable items, dedicating over 40 years to waste management activism.

Instead of the incinerator, he worked with local authorities to implement a system of recycling and reuse. At that time, incineration was still the mainstream method of waste treatment in Europe. But within just one year of implementing the new system, Capannori's recycling rate rose from 10% to 82%. In 2007, Capannori became the first European city to declare "Zero Waste." By 2021, its recycling rate had reached 86.5% (the European average is about 48%), and residual waste per person was only 59 kg, 60% lower than the Italian average. Thanks to these efforts, Capannori became the first officially certified Zero Waste city in Italy in 2022.

Global advocate for Zero Waste

Rossano Ercolini, now 70, is a grassroots environmental activist who has promoted the **Zero Waste** movement—aimed at eliminating waste through recycling and reuse—throughout Europe, Asia, North and South America. When asked about his first impression of Korea, this is what he said.

Ercolini won the **Goldman Environmental Prize** in 2013, often referred to as the “Nobel Prize for the Environment,” and serves as the president of **Zero Waste Italy**. He came to Korea to attend the **Seoul International Environmental Film Festival**, hosted by the Korea Green Foundation, held from June 5 to 30.

He was impressed by Korea’s well-developed recycling culture but noted: “I visited an environmental festival in Seoul the other day, and even there, many attendees were using disposable plastic cups.”

Indeed, Korea’s separation rate for waste was very high in 2023—at 86.8%. However, the recycling system can also give people the false impression that their responsibility ends with disposal. As mentioned earlier, Korea generates a high volume of plastic waste per capita. A 2023 study by Greenpeace and Professor Jang Yong-cheol from Chungnam National University found that only **16.4% of plastic household waste** in Korea was “materially recycled” into plastic again. The rest was incinerated or landfilled, which ultimately leads to greenhouse gas emissions or environmental pollution.

Ercolini emphasized the need to move away from the **linear model of production-consumption-disposal** and toward a circular economy. “By repairing items, we can reduce carbon emissions from raw material extraction and manufacturing,” he said. He pointed out that the **European Union** passed a new law in August last year to reinforce consumers’ **Right to Repair**, allowing them to get easier and cheaper repairs even beyond the standard two-year warranty.

Corporations must change—but consumers must demand it

Ercolini stressed that reducing waste depends on **consumers driving corporate change**. He suggested: “Writing letters to large franchise coffee chains that use a lot of plastic could be one way to start.”

He himself has sent many letters to companies, urging them to **change the design and materials of their product packaging** to make them easier to recycle. He even collaborated with Italy’s largest coffee brand, **Lavazza**, to develop reusable packaging.

“Corporations have the power to change (the waste problem),” he said. “They are on the same team as us. If civil society, politicians, and businesses don’t work together to address the waste and climate crisis, we will all lose.”

Old washing machines: reuse is 50 times more valuable than recycling

Ercolini also explained the **10 steps of Zero Waste practices**, including recycling, composting of organic waste, and waste reduction, but he especially emphasized the importance of **repair and reuse**.

“There’s research showing that recovering copper or aluminum from a discarded washing machine is worth only 3 or 4 euros, but if you repair and reuse it, it can be worth up to 150 euros,” he said. “Repair is both environmentally and economically beneficial.”

Na-sil Choi