



The Art and Science of Upcycling

(Written by Beryl McLean – HOPE researcher Qld)

Upcycling is breathing new life into waste by capturing individual imagination and creativity to make what is old, new again. From this bold statement we will start our journey to find out more about upcycling and how this initiative is part of the sustainability movement that is focused on how we can recycle and reuse what we already have.

(Image obtained from [FreePik](#))

It's about turning your trash into treasure because this will help to minimise the number of discarded materials in landfills and reduce the need for additional production. From a sustainability standpoint, upcycling is giving waste a new purpose whilst reducing the environmental footprint. For example, old wooden pallets can be crafted into coffee tables; worn-out denim can be repurposed into tote bags (a way to easily swap plastic bags without having to buy new ones!) or into quilts; and glass jars can be reused for meal storage or storing supplies.

History of upcycling

In the 1950's people had experienced significant rationing of products and resources due to the impact of World War II so after this period people were hungry to consume more disposable products. The increased consumer demand for newer products coincided with improvements in technology which was able to produce new types of cheap disposable items at affordable prices. Before this time, most people could not imagine using disposable items that would be used only once and then thrown away. Consequently, the impact of an ever-increasing demand for all types of products grew exponentially putting more demand on limited resources as people wanted increased access to cheaper goods than ever before. By the late 1960's scientists, some politicians and local community groups were concerned about the environmental impacts because of the unabated levels of consumerism, particularly single-use item waste.

Consequently, the first [Earth Day](#), 22 April 1970 was organised to raise awareness about the impacts of overconsumption, and the toll this was taking on the environment. Around the same time, environmentalists started using the phrase "reduce, reuse and recycle." This phrase indicated people should attempt to reduce the amount of goods they purchase or use, reuse the items they have already purchased and recycle whatever materials they can before disposing of anything.

The impetus for upcycling which was still considered a niche market in the late 1990's to early 2000's only really took off with the arrival of the internet as the '[Do it Yourself -DIY](#)' movement gained momentum with people posting upcycle projects online. The DIY culture emerged from a shift towards self-sufficiency and creativity in response to consumerism and globalisation of mass production. The crucial role the internet played helped to expand the importance of upcycling to a larger audience providing platforms for sharing ideas and selling handmade goods through sites such as [Etsy](#) and [Pinterest](#).

The economic downturn in 2008 further fuelled interest in DIY projects as a cost-effective alternative to consumer goods, fostering a sense of enterprising spirit for people seeking to create their own products. At the same time as an increased awareness about the positive impacts of upcycling coincided with growing concerns about environmental sustainability with many people opting to refurbish or repurpose unwanted items.

Upcycling is now firmly cemented in the sustainability suite of initiatives which collectively work in unison to focus efforts on taking a proactive role to combat and/or slow down the environmental impacts of climate change.

Upcycling is the groove of creative expression.

At the heart of upcycling is the unlimited design possibilities generated by getting more out of our current products and materials by using them again in a different or better way. In today's age of increasing consumption, it is crucial to reflect on our usage patterns and find ways to make the most out of our resources. Remember, it is not just about preserving resources but also about fostering creativity, innovation, and sustainable living.

Are you ready to become a member of the upcycling revolution because it is filled with unlimited opportunities from home décor, jewellery, and repurposed clothing. Here's some ideas to get your creative juices flowing -

- T-Shirt Tote Bags – cut and sew old T shirts to make study tote bags.
- Cereal Box Organiser – cut and cover cereal boxes to create custom magazine holders or drawer organisers.
- For unlimited ideas to put into practice, refer to [next upcycling project](#)

There is no end in finding out the '[how to](#)' in [upcycling](#), because no matter your budget and time, you will find an upcycling project for you.

The upcycling revolution has started with a recent Australian Government initiative to get big business on board in becoming a responsible advocate for sustainability in the ReMade in Australia program.



ReMade in Australia

The ReMade in Australia program is about providing certification to businesses to help the public to understand the products that we buy have been made from recycled materials. What this means is businesses who are certified under the program will display the ReMade in Australia label demonstrating their commitment to more sustainable practices.

The focus of this program is to get people to think more broadly about what goes into making a product - in other words to think about what resources are extracted, what goods are used and then discarded as waste. The push behind ReMade Australia is about ensuring the materials that go into producing a product uses recycled materials, which minimises the impact on our environment by avoiding resources going into landfill and reducing the need to extract new resources that in turn adds to the rates of deforestation, land erosion and pollution.

The Australian Government has set out a number of subsidies to make it attractive for business to become a signatory to the ReMade in Australia brand which is focused on finding new uses for products after they have served their useful life by:

- Recovering materials from products and using them to create new items;
- Restoring used products to like new condition; and
- Designing products to be durable and repairable which extends the lifespan of that product.

To learn more about the brand go to the official website: [ReMade in Australia](#).



Getting started.

Experts are constantly urging us to declutter our home. That may be good advice in general, but it is worth taking a moment before consigning something to the bin to consider whether or not it could be restored, repurposed or otherwise brought back to life. Beginning your journey towards upcycling can seem daunting but every small step counts and here are some ways you can get started –

(Image obtained from FreePik)

- Educate yourself on the materials that can be recycled in your community.
- Explore how you can upcycle items around your home.
- Connect with other like-minded upcycle groups who can share ideas and know-how, give friendly advice and be your cheer squad.

Resources to help you.

This list is where you can meet like-minded people.

- [Brisbane Australia Up-Cycled Cloth Collective](#)
- [The Nest Community Craft Collective for Upcycling](#)
- [Craft Workshops in Brisbane](#)
- [Ballerina with a Paintbrush](#)
- [Furniture Upcycling](#)
- [Treasure Markets](#)

For more useful tips and tricks on the merits of upcycling you can subscribe to the following free newsletters

- [Recycle Smart](#)
- [Forest Upcycling Project](#)
- [Reverse Garbage Queensland Community Blog](#)