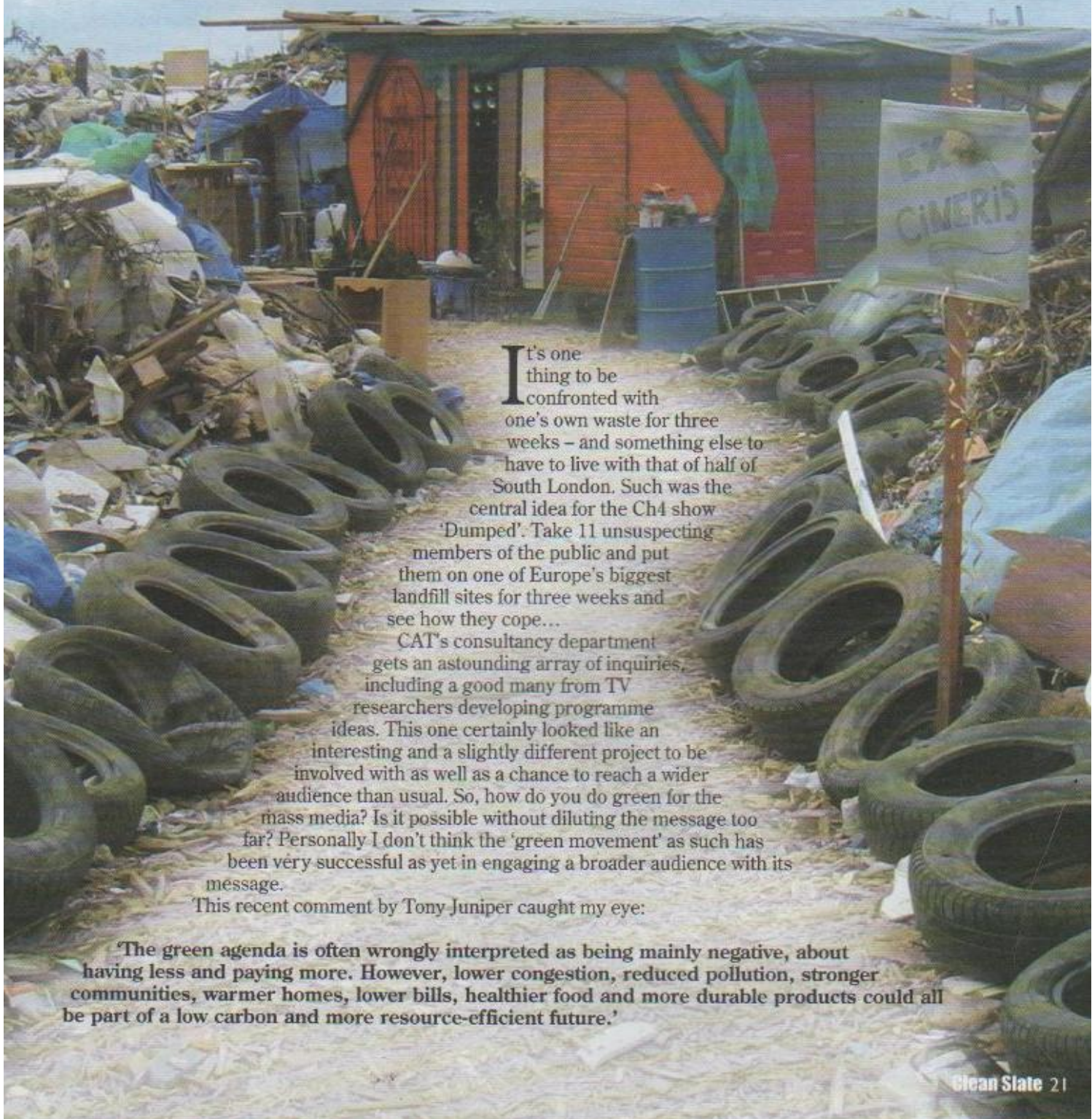


# DUMPED

(an Outline production for Channel 4)

Steve Jones, sector39.co.uk



It's one thing to be confronted with one's own waste for three weeks – and something else to have to live with that of half of South London. Such was the central idea for the Ch4 show 'Dumped'. Take 11 unsuspecting members of the public and put them on one of Europe's biggest landfill sites for three weeks and see how they cope...

CAT's consultancy department gets an astounding array of inquiries, including a good many from TV researchers developing programme ideas. This one certainly looked like an interesting and a slightly different project to be involved with as well as a chance to reach a wider audience than usual. So, how do you do green for the mass media? Is it possible without diluting the message too far? Personally I don't think the 'green movement' as such has been very successful as yet in engaging a broader audience with its message.

This recent comment by Tony Juniper caught my eye:

**'The green agenda is often wrongly interpreted as being mainly negative, about having less and paying more. However, lower congestion, reduced pollution, stronger communities, warmer homes, lower bills, healthier food and more durable products could all be part of a low carbon and more resource-efficient future.'**

Telling the world about dying dolphins or some impending global catastrophe is never going to sell well in the market place. Marketing executives will tell you 'don't sell the product, sell its benefits', Coke® is more than a drink, it's youth, freedom,

expression... Green has to mean so much more than do-gooders selflessly going without; it's smart, forward thinking, and a new beginning. Whatever it is, I am fascinated to see how others approach the subject. Maybe I am being a bit harsh on our green forebears, but my point is that there is still a long way to go to capture the hearts, minds and imaginations of the masses. I am not sure, I hasten to add, that this show is the answer to all that, but it is a genuine attempt to explore the territory from a different angle. There is a website, a blog and all sorts of other media arising from this show and others, all part of building a C4/green interactive multi-media presence.

The backdrop to the whole three week 'Dumped' experience is a Croydon landfill site. Forty acres of quarried out land, gradually being carpeted in a layer of south London's finest waste 67m deep (that's a 200 foot mountain in old money!). More specifically, this is the contents of everyone's wheelie- and dustbins, mixed with an awful lot of building waste and capped with clay. There is a ceaseless freight train-like queue of heavily laden lorries disgorging their loads from dawn 'til dusk, while the big pile just gets higher and higher. They compact it all down with huge monster bulldozers.

Ironically, you can see the BedZed building clearly from the top of the tip. Eco-architect Bill Dunster's Beddington Zero Energy Development is a high profile residential project. An integrated, energy efficient living and working environment... Great stuff I am sure, but it's going to take more than one BedZed to offset the energy being thrown into the big hole in the ground next door. I was staggered how close the dump is to major housing developments.

Nothing can really prepare you for an up-close view of the enormity of what we currently throw away. Not only the physical waste but the financial input – the plant and machinery that goes with it – those big dumper trucks for example are £150k each! Yes, it hits you right away but after three weeks of relentless queues of groaning trucks, the true scale of it all really starts to sink in. There's lots of talk about Royal Albert Halls full of waste, by way of illustration, but you still



have to really see it to begin to appreciate what an Albert Hall's worth of waste actually looks and feels like, and we generate one every minute of the day in this country.

I must add that the longer I spent on the tip the more I came to respect the complex and difficult processes that its workers were charged with. It's no mean

feat processing such an amount of rubbish, and the way it is done is becoming increasingly sophisticated. The guys are doing a good job; the problem is the sheer volume of waste.

So to the show... It's a reality show, 'Big Brother' style, and was aired in the first week of September: four one-hour episodes, prime time. I'll assume you've not seen it, it being aimed more specifically at a 'Big Brother' audience rather than *Clean Slate* readers.

The big TV invite had gone out for contestants who were up for a 3 week 'eco challenge', all they knew was that they had to have jobs and turn up with their passports and so many kilos of luggage, ready for anything. There was a twenty grand pot and whoever was left at the end of the stint got a straight share of it. Cruelly, the production crew drove the contestants right past Gatwick on their way to the tip, just to let them entertain fantasies of Costa Rica right to the last. It's just a short jump from the runways to Beddington landfill site, where a designated quadrant of the tip was to be their home for the next 21 days.

The challenge was this: starting with nothing but a bit of ingenuity, just how far can you go in trying to build a life from the waste that the rest of us are currently throwing away. Shelter, washing and toilet facilities, cooking, comfort, recreation, all those things we take for granted. What might the contestants learn in the process, and would it make good entertainment viewing?

CAT's role in all this was to act as technical advisor on the practical tests the contestants took part in, and to generally be on hand, ready to rise to whatever particular challenges arose. It was both hard work and lots of fun, with plenty of opportunity for input into the show. Having seen the broadcast, I am slightly frustrated that the editors focused mainly on the human drama side of things, rather than the actual tasks themselves: quite a few didn't make the final cut at all. My first observation was how wasteful TV is... The numbers of AA batteries they got through in radio mikes etc, etc. 'Dumped' must have cost a lot of money to make, with a big crew on location and all the support and materials required and they dumped a lot of the footage along with the rubbish.

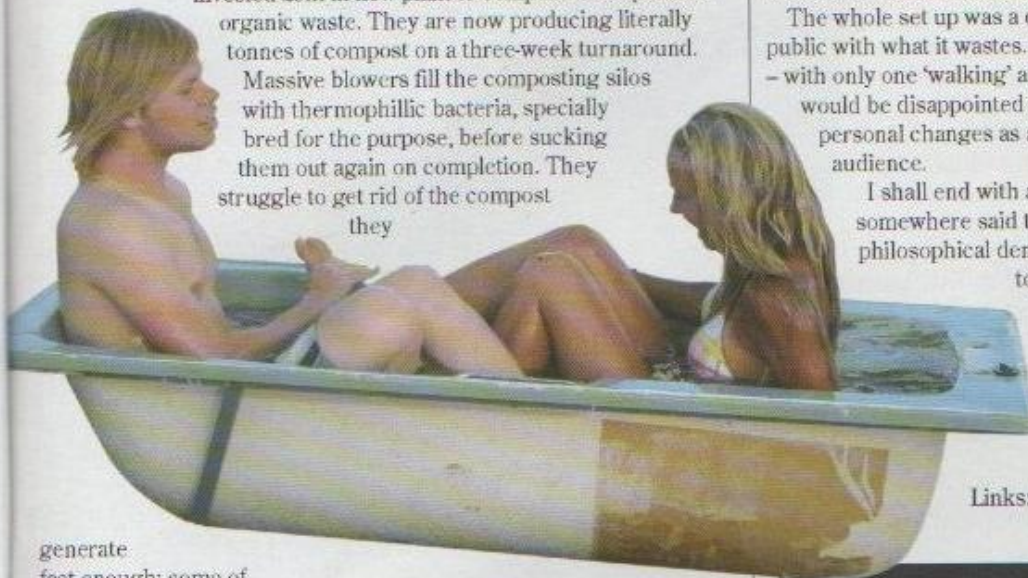
The thing that most tickled me was the recycling system eco-aware student Lawrence set up for the group. Landfill, cans and recyclables, and compost. It looked so bizarre, set up amidst a landfill site. You are camped on rubbish, so the idea of having any sort of bin is utterly pointless. Although I might add that the actual set was constructed out of 1000 tonnes of sifted skip waste, arranged by the set builders; real black bag waste would have been far too random, dangerous and toxic.

It took the contestants ages to rustle up any sense of urgency after the initial rush to put together an emergency shelter and compost loo. Finally though, they did rise to the challenge and created a fairly impressive less temporary shelter, a solar water heater, a kitchen, décor and all that. They got used to the compost toilet and they even got as far as making a hot tub and sauna. I found myself wishing they could have had another week or two, to take it a bit further... I came away feeling I had learned a lot and had been forced to think about these things in a much deeper way. Waste, let me tell you, is BIG business. Big budget. Big politics. Even Bigger machines. And absolutely essential to our day-to-day life.

I took a tour with the site manager, and got a glimpse of the rate of change and investment in the whole area. Not that it was said, as such, but I can imagine that back in the bad old days, the 1970s or '80s, these piles of waste were still a relatively new phenomenon, on that scale anyway. Waste was just literally left in old clay pits, quarries and gravel holes – the whole lot dumped into a huge hole in the ground, capped off with clay and left to leach toxic chemicals into the ground water and methane into the atmosphere for ever after.

Times are changing, however, and Croydon's overseers had just invested £9m in new plant to compost the separated organic waste. They are now producing literally tonnes of compost on a three-week turnaround.

Massive blowers fill the composting silos with thermophilic bacteria, specially bred for the purpose, before sucking them out again on completion. They struggle to get rid of the compost they



generate

fast enough; some of it goes off to Epsom and Ascot racecourses, some to Wimbledon, to feed the hallowed tennis lawns, as well as to every park and green space in the district.

All skip waste is sorted and anything recyclable extracted, firstly by machine, finally by hand. So really all that is left for landfill is building waste, sorted non-recyclable skip waste and all those black bags.

Waste management is changing fast, bringing us ever closer to the realisation that there really is no such thing as waste...only unutilised resources. Paradoxically, the site is actually quite beautiful at night, once the engines and dust have subsided.

I started to feel differently about it all; it's actually not all bad or out of control, it's very carefully managed. The foxes, badgers, the millions of birds, the nesting geese seem to like it, anyway – nature is very adaptable and never lets an opportunity go begging. When we so readily endorse developing brown field sites, we overlook the fact that many brown field sites sustain much more biodiversity than the green belt does. Part of the Croydon dump has even been designated an SSSI (Sites of Special Scientific Interest), due to the bird life there. It confounded my expectations in so many ways.

As for the show, the truth is that the weather was too nice for the first two weeks so the pressure wasn't on, with quite a lot of sunbathing, preening and bickering and other BB type behaviour, and not enough creative, 'let's all build a new eco paradise thing' going on. It took a long while to build any consensus in the group and there was a distinct lack of hard skills available. Especially when the carpenter walked on the second day, claiming it wasn't challenging enough and he didn't care about the environment anyway, and he was off to Vegas for a holiday instead – just to prove how much he didn't care.

But they got there in the end; an ever expanding residence, with veranda and summer house emerged from the mire, an evolving range of stoves and ovens appeared, cell phones were charged with bicycle generators, a wind turbine rented with the income from scrap sold and generally the contestants slowly got their act together. Tasks were structured in way designed to introduce key facts about waste in the UK in 2007, and to confront the contestants with them in a tangible way. For example, they were given – in 3 huge family-size suitcases – the 1000 mobile phones the UK throws away every half an hour, and then told that one of the 1,000 had a £10 sim card in it that would allow them to call home.

The whole set up was a deliberate ploy to confront the viewing public with what it wastes. It had a big impact on the contestants – with only one 'walking' and the remaining 10 leaving saying they would be disappointed with themselves if they didn't make personal changes as a result. I hope it had a similar impact on its audience.

I shall end with a quote from Milan Kundera, who somewhere said that the definition of 'kitsch' is the philosophical denial of the existence of sh\*t. Well, Milan, to add to your definition, let me offer you a definition of the 's' word: it's an unutilised resource, polite or not... And judging by what I witnessed in Croydon, we need to get our unutilised resources together sometime very soon! ☺

Links: <http://www.channel4.com/green>

#### Some landfill stats...

- UK landfill sites are rapidly filling up, yet we remain one of Europe's worst recyclers. Our 50 per cent by 2012 target for recycling is lower than what some EU nations are currently achieving – Germany 50 per cent, Belgium 75 per cent.
- This one is my favourite stat, (favourite?)... We in the UK landfill 3 billion disposable nappies a year, which will take up to 500 years to biodegrade.

