

William Rathje (1945-2012)

Date : August 3, 2012

William L. Rathje (PhD Harvard 1971), professor emeritus of archaeology at the University of Arizona, studied rubbish as an insight into human behaviour. "The only way to know a person is by what they throw away", he has repeatedly said. Jeff Harrison has written a comprehensive tribute for Univ. of Arizona News (see [here](#)).

When I was an undergraduate the Bruntland Report *Our Common Future* (1987, OUP) was high on the reading list of many courses and most of the world's leaders had just come back from the Rio Summit. Agenda 21 was on everyone's lips. It was a time when many of us really felt, perhaps naively, that global attitudes towards pollution and waste were actually changing.

At the time, one of my friends was doing his dissertation on junk mail and he proudly carried around one of his library finds, Rathje's books, something with 'Garbology' in the title. I remember thinking, embarrassingly now, what a load of populist crap. But then one day I eventually picked it up and read a few passages. It was simply inspirational. That, combined with a few conversations with people wiser than I was, had converted me away from the populist crap thesis. If our attitudes towards waste really were to change, didn't we need more hard core scientists who could nevertheless still convey complex ideas to the average lay-person.

The world of material culture studies has recently lost one such person. One of its most innovative pioneers. In 1990, Rathje was granted the Award for Public Understanding of Science and Technology given by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which cited "his innovative contributions to public understanding of science and its societal impacts by demonstrating with his creative 'Garbage Project' how the scientific method can document problems and identify solutions." He equally won the AAA's 1992 Solon T. Kimball Award for Public and Applied Anthropology.

In addition to his numerous articles, chapters, reviews and books, Rathje has only this year finished editing a monumental two volume [Encyclopedia of Consumption and Waste](#) published by Sage.



Garbologist Bill Rathje at Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island