

# Gratis Goods: The New Recycling

BY PETER BRONSKI

I learned early on in life that you have to work for the things you want. There's no such thing as a free ride, and you certainly can't get something for nothing. Well, that was until now. A new grassroots movement is sweeping across the globe, and it's "changing the world one gift at a time." It's called Freecycling.

Free what? Freecycling is an online electronic forum for individuals and non-profit organizations to "recycle"



Audubon International staffer Peter Bronski is ready to freecycle this lovely vase...any takers?

unwanted items by offering them, free of charge, to other interested freecyclers in their community. In the spirit of the movement, one person's trash truly becomes another person's treasure. Think of it as the next evolution of "Have a penny, Leave a penny; Need a penny, Take a penny." Wisconsin's *Herald Times* Reporter said "It's like eBay—only free." Which, I suppose, makes it FreeBay, except that it's Freecycling.

The movement, founded by the Arizona-based non-profit group, RISE Inc., started in May 2003 to promote waste reduction in Tucson, Arizona's downtown and help save the desert landscape from ever expanding landfills. In the short year and a half since its inception, the Freecycle Network has expanded exponentially, and today nearly 1,100 communities are freecycling in more than twenty countries across the globe, from Belgium to Brazil, Canada to Colombia, and most anywhere in between. In total, there are more than 260,000 people registered as freecyclers.

I decided to investigate the local freecycling movement where I live in northeastern New Jersey on the cusp of Hudson and Bergen Counties, directly across the Hudson River from midtown Manhattan. Here there are three freecycling community groups. The largest, Bergen County, has nearly 2,000 members, and the Hoboken group has about 140 people. The third group, Hudson County, was recently formed and has just 41 members, which doesn't sound like many, until you take into account that the group has grown by nearly 100% since I last checked a week ago.

Still, these numbers pale in comparison to the throngs of registered users in the largest freecycling cities. Portland, Oregon is leading the pack with more than 7,000 people. Chicago, New York City, and Dallas-Fort Worth each have more than 4,000 freecyclers. And Austin, Grand Rapids, Washington DC, and Ann Arbor aren't far behind.

## From T.V. sets to wet suits

You can get or give just about anything through the Freecycle Network, so long as it's legal, appropriate for all ages, and, of course, free. And it all happens at the click of a button through e-mails, list

serves, and online message forums. It's amazing the types of items that change hands through the network. My local Hoboken group recently had the following offerings: a 17-inch color television with remote control, an ironing board, a maple china cabinet, and a gas range. In Denver, Colorado, the offerings are equally diverse: packaging peanuts, a kerosene heater, one cute kitten. Wanted items can be just as varied: laptop computers, paint (any color), a microwave, a 26-inch bicycle, a bunk bed frame for twin mattresses.

In a world dominated by a throw-away mentality, freecycling is a counter-culture current that's connecting people in their own communities, diverting goods from the waste stream and reducing pressure on our landfills, and finding grateful recipients for free (and perfectly good) items that might otherwise wind up in the trash. It sounds like a genuine win-win situation. The only question is: Can they keep the movement's momentum going? Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a cream-colored ceramic vase that I need to freecycle.

Want to learn more, locate and join a local group, or start your own? Visit <http://www.freecycle.org>. ●