“War on Waste has helped elevate the profile of waste, recycling, the environmental impact of human behaviour and the choices we make. As a result, we are much more aware of the complexity of the issues and the impact we have on the environment, and waste issues are higher on the community agenda.

War on Waste has mobilised sectors of the community that may not have previously considered these issues, including businesses, and has added to the important work of practitioners, peak bodies, advocates on waste, recycling and environmental issues.

Importantly, there is a broader discussion around innovation and significant policy reform that would have a meaningful impact on Australia’s waste footprint - and more attention to the need to do better in waste management, including recycling locally.”

Stan Krpan, past CEO, Sustainability Victoria (2012-2019)

“This was a most useful piece of Australian journalism and television that raised public awareness and posed meaningful questions to leaders.”

Vaughan Levitzke PSM, Chief Executive, Green Industries SA

“War on Waste has raised everyone’s awareness – from communities and businesses, to governments and to elected officials – of how wasteful our society is and how much we consume. It has successfully put pressure on businesses and ministers to make changes to reduce the amount of waste we create.”

Rose Read, CEO, National Waste and Recycling Council

“War on Waste has done a great deal to enrich and expand the debate about waste in the overall community.”

Pete Shmigel, CEO, Australian Council of Recyclers
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The ABC’s ground-breaking War on Waste TV series has triggered systems-wide changes that are slashing the waste footprint of hundreds of Australian organisations, largely due to the series’ engaging and entertaining format.

A new study by the University of Technology Sydney’s Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) and the ABC, found many individuals and families who were inspired by the show reduced their own waste and went on to drive or demand similar changes within organisations, institutions and government entities, greatly amplifying the impact of the popular series.

War on Waste, hosted by ABC presenter, Craig Reucassel, first aired in May 2017, reaching an audience of 3.8 million viewers, with a second series in July 2018 attracting an audience of 3.3 million viewers.

Following Series 2, ISF researchers identified 452 high-impact waste-reducing initiatives across businesses, schools, universities, government and community organisations in which War on Waste played a key role. These include Woolworths supermarket’s decision to remove 3.2 billion single-use plastic bags a year from its checkouts, an explosion in cafes offering discounts to customers with reusable cups, hospitality businesses eliminating single-use plastic straws and schools nationwide leading the charge to reduce waste in classrooms and playgrounds.
Sparking change – format matters

ISF’s case studies and analysis revealed viewers responded positively to the show’s unique storytelling format, including Reucassell’s willingness to cheerfully rummage through our bins to expose the extent and nature of Australia’s waste crisis. Respondents cited Reucassell’s humour and encouraging, personable manner, the show’s dramatic visualisations (such as the enormous plastic footprint on Manly Beach in Sydney, which represented the volume of plastic discarded in Australia every minute), and the many accessible solutions. Viewers also identified with the ordinary Australians - of all ages and from all walks of life - who featured on-screen with Reucassell as they rose to the challenge to ‘clean up’ and to campaign for change.

A social shift?

Following Series 2, 68% of viewers reported behavioural changes in response to War on Waste, equating to about 20% of the adult Australian population, according to separate research by the ABC Audience Data and Insights team. By contrast, many public education and awareness-raising campaigns struggle to achieve widespread shifts in behaviours and attitudes.

Researchers also emphasised the 452 systems-wide initiatives identified over the six-month research period were likely ‘just the tip of the iceberg’, as the study was designed to capture and analyse a ‘snap-shot’ of impacts. This suggests the total number of systems-wide initiatives across Australia is much higher than the sample studied.
Fertile ground for change

ABC TV’s War on Waste first burst onto our screens in July 2017, just as a perfect storm was building around the management of Australia’s waste. Presenter Craig Reucassell stepped in to ask if we Australians, as a nation, could reduce our waste - and to show us how.

In 2017, China had announced it would no longer import ‘foreign’ rubbish, exposing Australia’s vulnerability due to its reliance on offshore recycling, especially for waste plastics and paper. A local glut of waste glass was, at the same time, piling up, highlighting limited opportunities for onshore recycling. Meanwhile, global and local waste campaigns were gaining traction. Shocking images across social media were revealing the huge volumes of plastic waste leaking into the world’s oceans and waterways, maiming and killing wildlife and damaging ecosystems. And with every household throwing out, on average, $3,800 worth of food a year (source: Oz Harvest), Australia had found itself among the most wasteful nations on earth.

This reality did not sit well with Australian’s self-image. The nation had pioneered recycling programs in the 1960s and had taken great pride in its Keep Australia Beautiful Campaign, launched in the same era. Australians retained a strong belief that waste of any kind was undesirable.
INTRODUCTION

However, decades of consumerism and an explosion in plastic packaging and convenience products had steadily filled our bins to overflowing. Public complacency and the failure of recycling programs to keep pace meant huge volumes of potentially recyclable materials - and food - were ending up in landfills. By 2016, Australians were generating, on average, 540kg of waste each a year.

“I have been working in waste prevention and reduction for 25 years, and War on Waste is the best thing that’s happened in that time.”

Paul Klymenko, CEO, Planet Ark

Many community groups were tirelessly swimming against this waste tide - from efforts to rescue usable food before it was binned, to reducing plastic packaging and disposable coffee cups, to local clean-ups along our beaches. Larger environmental organisations like Planet Ark, Clean Up Australia, World Wildlife Fund Australia and Greenpeace Australia Pacific were also working across the board, from grass roots projects to lobbying decision-makers.

Our waste was, however, mostly ‘out of sight, and out of mind’. Many Australians had little idea where their rubbish was going. Most of us were unaware of the precariousness of our waste management and recycling systems, of our growing waste stockpiles and of the sheer extent of what we all, often thoughtlessly, throw away.

This proved to be fertile ground for the War on Waste’s unique entertaining and solutions-based format.
About ABC TV’s War on Waste series

In the three episodes of Series 1, broadcast in July 2017, presenter Craig Reucassel confronted viewers with shocking footage of his visits to our tips and waste processing centres, brought neighbours together to pick through their bins and created visual stunts that left nothing to the imagination.

A Melbourne tram filled with used disposable coffee cups highlighted the one billion cups that go to landfill every year, and Reucassel and his giant ball of plastic bags were filmed chasing politicians shirking a ban on lightweight plastic bags. Out in the countryside, newly picked bananas were seen being dumped en masse - simply because their irregular sizes did not comply with supermarkets’ requirements.

The series also followed the efforts of the residents of one suburban street to reduce their waste and how they did it. Reucassel challenged us to do better – and demonstrated that we could.

A separate solutions episode was broadcast in December 2017, which revisited some of the earlier issues.

In the three episodes of Series 2, broadcast in July-August 2018, Reucassel took on plastic water bottles, straws, electronic waste, fast furniture and food waste, and delved further into the national recycling crisis.
This time, in Series 2, instead of looking at the waste produced by residents on a suburban street, Reucassell introduced viewers to the students of Kiama High School as they pulled on gloves to ‘audit’ their own bins. They lay their ‘icky’ garbage out in the playground to visualise the problem. He also helped out a young Queensland girl running her own ‘Straw No More’ waste clean-up campaign and turned up on the doorstep of McDonald’s HQ with his ‘McChokey’ turtle mascot made of used straws. And he masqueraded as a staff member at a food court to find out how much food Australians are wasting at every meal, every day.

The reach of the two series went beyond the strong broadcast television and iview audiences of 3.8 million (2017) and 3.3 million viewers (2018) as the ABC developed ancillary content across its radio, television and online platforms, turning waste into a high-profile national conversation. This included War on Waste segments within other popular shows such as Gardening Australia, a dedicated waste-focused episode of Q&A, numerous related radio spots, both local and national, as well as podcasts, community activation events and dedicated web resources for the community and schools, highlighting ‘everyday waste heroes’, useful case studies and offering practical tips.

Both series executed highly successful marketing and impact campaigns. On social media, War on Waste has so far been the ABC’s biggest ever campaign, with the irregular-shaped bananas clip attracting 17 million views alone. Series 1 and 2 combined had 23.6K tweets with a reach of 57.4 million on Twitter for #WarOnWasteAU and related hashtags.
About the study

To understand the systemic impact of the War on Waste series in reducing Australia’s waste footprint, the ABC partnered with the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) to design a framework and process for capturing this in the six months following Season 2.

The final framework (Appendix B) provided:
- a systematic process to capture evidence and stories of organisational and societal change
- a rigorous framework for making defensible claims about the impact of series

The framework defined ‘impact’ as:
“Any change or action contributing to the systemic reduction in Australia’s waste footprint - which occurred or was enhanced in some way or to some extent - by the War on Waste series.”

Two methods were used to capture evidence of impacts. First, a proactive, methodical online search for evidence of reported or expected impacts, with follow-up interviews to generate reliable case studies. Second, a ‘catch all’ online survey identified impacts not reported elsewhere or not expected (so outside the reach of the online search terms used) facilitating the development of similar case studies (from Series 1 and Series 2).

Identified impacts were classified based on different characteristics. The research team under the guidance of ISF experts identified the type and stage of change, the person or group responsible for taking action within a business, school, university, government or community organisation, and the likely influence or contribution of War on Waste.

This report provides an overview of the identified impacts that are contributing to systemic reductions in Australia’s waste footprint and analyses the role of ABC’s TV War on Waste series in achieving change.

While this research provides a rigorous overview of impacts, due to limited resources and time, the changes captured are just one ‘slice’ of the overall impact ‘pie’. The impact of War on Waste could be confidently expected to be broader, deeper and more enduring than the impacts represented here. The graph below illustrates how change and its drivers were conceptualised.
Following Series 1 of War on Waste in 2017, research by the ABC found significant shifts in the understanding of waste and the behaviour of many people touched by the series. Following Series 2 in 2018, the new ISF study has confirmed that audience’s personal responses have also been translated into systems-wide changes within Australia’s private, public and community sectors, extending the show’s influence as an important driver of waste-reduction initiatives, models and practices Australia-wide.

The study found that by reducing waste at the source, by replacing single-use items with reusable alternatives and by recycling more and more effectively, organisations and institutions of all types are helping to reduce Australia’s waste footprint.
About half the organisations and institutions – the changemakers – took actions to improve their own operations and/or the services and products they offered based on ideas from the show. Another 23% of changes were driven by individuals motivated to push for system-wide change by influencing businesses, schools, governments and community organisations to take action. Many new ideas were also sparked, existing initiatives amplified, and future plans made.

**KEY TERMS**

**NEW CHANGE:**
Did not existing prior to War on Waste, and started because of War on Waste

- **Catalyse**
  - Catalysed known idea into action by inspiring agent to directly make a change within their power

- **Drive**
  - Drove known idea to action by raising awareness of stakeholders to push for or agree to change

- **Spark**
  - Sparked a new idea by inspiring agent to directly make a change within their power

**EXISTING CHANGE:**
Already existed prior to War on Waste

**INDEPENDENT CHANGE:**
Started at same time or after, but independently not influenced by War on Waste

- **Platform**
  - Provided a platform for agent to leverage when promoting existing initiative

- **Amplify**
  - Amplified reach of existing initiative by highlighting initiative on show

- **Surge**
  - Created a surge of interest in existing initiative by raising awareness of issue amongst stakeholders

**FUTURE CHANGE:**
Efforts underway to prompt those with power to take action, but not yet achieved

- **Engage**
  - Encouraged agent to directly engage those with power to make change in order to prompt action

- **Transform**
  - Encouraged agent to bring about transformational behaviour change at whole-of-community level

- **Pressure**
  - Encouraged agent to attempt to bring about change by engaging the public to lobby/advocate

---

"A lot of people had already heard about what I was doing, but it was just really hard to get people fired up. Then War on Waste came along and suddenly a lot of what I’ve been saying to people made sense: people could connect the dots."

"In the busy-ness of running a small business we have found it challenging to implement ideas for more sustainable practice. Watching War on Waste was an inspiration for taking note and working harder towards our sustainability vision and goals."

"I wanted to do it but War on Waste gave me the courage and confidence."

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Did the War on Waste drive positive change?

The ABC/ISF study found evidence that 73% of the 452 waste-reducing initiatives identified were directly influenced by the War on Waste, with the remainder ‘likely’ or ‘possibly’ influenced.

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<td><strong>73%</strong></td>
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**Definitely:** Changemaker explicitly acknowledged influence of War on Waste.

**Likely:** Timing and knowledge of pathway to impact make influence probable.

**Possibly:** Influence possible but unable to be confidently established.
A substantial body of international research has established that driving change is challenging and uncertain. Even when clear, accessible information is provided, public education campaigns often struggle to shift habits and behaviour. What, then, has worked for War on Waste?

The ISF and ABC study found the series was variously ‘shocking, memorable and emotional’, ‘inspiring, motivating and uplifting’, ‘accessible and solutions-focused’ and – importantly – always ‘balanced with humour’.

**Tone and host** - Craig Reucassel was described as an ‘authentic’ and ‘effective communicator’ who showed courage and humour while challenging the status quo of plastic-packaged, throw-away convenience. He avoided lecturing or ‘making people feel horrible or guilty’ about their waste footprints, partly by revealing his own fallibilities such as his drawer full of old mobile phones at home. By casting himself as a cheerful, charismatic, ordinary dad on a journey of discovery, Reucassel was ‘easy to relate to’ as he shared his viewers’ dismay over the extent of Australia’s waste crisis. In doing so, he inspired many others to follow as he implemented and uncovered simple solutions to reduce our waste.
Making the invisible visible – War on Waste’s memorable visual stunts exposed an otherwise largely hidden problem and communicated more about waste than any list of facts or statistics ever could. The Melbourne tram filled with disposable coffee cups, the mountain of used clothes in Sydney’s Martin Place, the giant plastic footprint on Sydney’s Manly Beach and the ‘McChokey’ mascot of plastic straws were the most talked about visual stunts. Images of birds and marine life injured by plastic – including a turtle – and farmers forced to dump ‘imperfect’ fresh bananas to comply with supermarkets’ standards, also provoked empathy in viewers, driving responses.

Learning by doing – Alongside ordinary Australians from diverse backgrounds, Reucassel walked through achievable solutions and actions, like picking up straws and litter, sorting and recycling waste, avoiding plastic bags, switching to reusable coffee cups and composting food waste. Seeing the success of ‘people like us’ on their TV screens or devices inspired viewers to initiate their own changes. Kiama High School’s efforts – in which students dug through their own garbage with Reucassel to audit their waste and to devise solutions – were especially effective. “Kids were inspired by seeing other kids create change.” Likewise, the ‘Straw No More’ campaign of young Molly.

Supersizing impact beyond the individual – Viewers also responded positively to Reucassel challenging businesses and governments to take responsibility for waste. He joined a ‘flash mob’ to remove unnecessary plastic packaging from supermarket items and knocked on the doors of decision makers, seeking to deliver his giant ball of single-use plastic bags. Illustrating that failures in waste management were systemic problems, the series encouraged people to demand changes from governments, local councils and businesses while making changes where they could.

Building momentum over time: War on Waste Series 1 sparked significant impact and behaviour change. Series 2 continued to build the momentum to support sustainable longer-term impact.
The Big Picture

Pathways to change

While every pathway to change is complex and unique, and many interconnected factors play a part, ISF experts were confident War on Waste played a decisive role in the bulk of systems-wide impacts identified. Interviews with changemakers revealed the extent of the series’ impact. The study looked at four main groups to understand how the series led to systems-wide change: government entities, businesses, educational institutions and community organisations.

Supporting traditional advocates: Governments and the community sector

Local councils, State governments and the Federal Government have responsibility, at different levels, for the management of waste. Community organisations also have a long history of involvement in campaigns to ‘clean up’ waste and pollution to reduce waste at the source. War on Waste gave both these sectors a new platform and enabled them to leverage the heightened public interest in, and concern about, waste to drive policies and programs to minimise waste generation and to maximise waste recovery.

Community expectations following the series pushed many local governments to lead by example, through changes such as single-use plastic bans within their own operations or at sponsored events. Local councils, which have the direct responsibility for kerbside waste collection, also used the ‘War on Waste’ slogan and related hashtags to connect with residents and businesses. At the state government level, new initiatives and policies, such as Western Australia’s plastic bag ban and Queensland’s draft waste strategy, explicitly refer to the impact of War on Waste on their communities’ ‘consciousness’ and preferences. The study identified 34 government initiatives.

The series boosted the efforts of community and environmental groups as well as inspiring new recruits and programs, building on the long-term campaigns of organisations such as Planet Ark, Responsible Cafes, Take 3 for the Sea, Compost Revolution, Oz Harvest, Foodbank, Plastic Free July, Compost Revolution and many others. A total of 68 community groups, organisations, campaigns and NGOs were identified taking 83 actions influenced by War on Waste, targeting local governments, businesses and the public, and scrutinising their own operations.
Inspiring new players: Education institutions and businesses

Educational institutions, especially primary and high schools, have significant potential to drive change by implementing new operational practices, by educating the next generation of decision-makers and, through their students, by introducing families and older relatives to new ways of reducing or managing waste. By putting schools in the spotlight, War on Waste turned kids tackling waste into everyday heroes that young Australians could relate to. An associated suite of ABC educational resources for teachers provided easy online access to information and action plans that will ensure ongoing impact. A total of 211 actions by 111 schools, colleges and universities were identified, ranging from the introduction of co-mingled recycling, return and earn bins, e-waste collections, plastic-free lunch days, reusable ‘slushy’ cups and bees wax wraps to school bans on single-use plastic straws.

Businesses, too, have great potential influence through the products and services they provide, the often large scale of their own operations and the competition they can create to encourage other businesses to match their efforts. The 74 businesses identified, taking 125 actions, ranged from small enterprises to big household names. While War on Waste highlighted hospitality and food service industries reducing single-use plastics such as coffee cups and straws, its influence rippled out to other industries in interesting and surprising ways. For example, hospitals and clinics were notable, introducing recycling systems and replacing single-use plastics with reusables.
The changemakers

A total of 277 organisations and institutions were identified, implementing the 452 actions studied. The largest number of changemakers were in education (40%). This is unsurprising given the many institutions in this sector, the integration of sustainability into the national curriculum and the control that can be exerted over both their internal operations and classroom activities. However, the extent of responses from schools, and the determination and enthusiasm of so many teachers, students and families, was exceptional. Their ‘recruitment’ via the series for efforts to reduce Australia’s waste footprint represents a significant achievement.

Stages of change

The majority of actions and changes identified (80%) had been implemented or were in the process of being implemented when the study was conducted. Interestingly, only 7% of impacts were built on existing initiatives, clearly demonstrating the series sparked new activities within Australia’s waste management landscape.

Intention: General indication of future action.
Commitment: Clear and specific details of particular change (usually including timeframe).
Initiated: Begun any concrete action to achieve change.
Completed: Action/change fully completed (or fully initiated/implemented if ongoing change).
Evaluated: Impact of change on waste footprint verified and measured.
Existing: Was already happening but enhanced in some way by War on Waste.