

Sunday, May 28, 2006 - 12:00 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

EcoConsumer

A call for recycling

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

With its sleek look and clever ringtones, the modern cellphone has become a cultural icon. Many of us can't imagine living without one. But the environmental impacts of so many phones may be as profound as the social impacts.



PAUL SCHMID / THE SEATTLE TIMES

More than 200 million people in the U.S. have cellphones, and more than 125 million cellphones go out of service each year, according to the Wireless Alliance. The average cellphone has a life span of 18 months. Cellphones contain a host of hazardous materials, such as arsenic, beryllium, cadmium, copper, lead and brominated flame retardants, says the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

When buying, using or getting rid of a cellphone, follow these tips to reduce the impact on the environment and save money:

It's only a phone: Suffering from cellphone-feature overload? Many folks have a cellphone because they want to make and receive calls on the go — that's it. A 2005 University of Michigan survey reported that more than 40 percent of cellphone users did not know how to send or receive text messages or download a ring tone, let alone use all the other fancy features. If you buy a basic phone without all the latest features, you may pay \$30 for the phone, as opposed to \$100 or more. You'll also conserve resources and reduce frustration.

One for all: On the other hand, if you're tech-savvy and own a variety of the latest gadgets, consider getting one device to serve as your cellphone, personal digital assistant (PDA) and music player. Soon these types of units will also offer limitless videos, fast Internet access and other services. If you use one device that performs several functions, and you sell or give away your old single-function devices, you can save money and resources.

Used isn't that old: You'll find a wide variety of refurbished phones, with warranties, for sale online — do an Internet search for "refurbished cellphones." Buying a used phone can save you \$100 or more. Refurbished phones are also a good choice if you use prepaid cellphone service.

When shopping for a used cellphone, make sure it will work with your service carrier. Some carriers, primarily T-Mobile and Cingular, use an internal subscriber identity module (SIM) card in their phones. This makes it easy to move your phone number and account information to another phone — just switch the SIM card.

Get a charge out of your battery: Good news: Many phones now use less-toxic lithium-ion batteries. New "fuel cell" batteries being developed for cellphones should be even more eco-friendly.

The current average life of a lithium-ion battery is two to three years, or 400-500 charges. To extend battery life: If the keys on your phone are exposed, lock the keys to avoid making accidental calls or triggering the backlight. Reduce use of extras such as games and music. Never leave a phone in a hot car; heat is especially damaging to lithium-ion batteries.

Always recycle rechargeable cellphone batteries. Locations abound — check the King County recycling listings (www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/wdidw). Under "Select a material," click on "batteries," then "rechargeable batteries."

No trash — save cash: As of October 2005, it's illegal to put a cellphone in the garbage in King County. Fortunately, numerous businesses and nonprofits accept old cellphones at no charge, or even pay you for them. You should never have to pay to recycle a cellphone. Most recycled cellphones are refurbished and resold in developing countries, where a huge demand exists for America's cast-off phones.

Find recyclers in the King County recycling listings. Click on "electronic equipment," then "cellphones."

ReCellular, a Michigan-based recycler, offers a handy online tool to help you erase the data on your cellphone before you sell or recycle it. The Cell Phone Data Eraser(www.wirelessrecycling.com/home/data_eraser) provides instructions for many makes and models of phones.

Eventually phones die, and the parts need to be recycled. Motivated by European regulations, Nokia and other manufacturers are developing cellphones that can be disassembled in a factory in seconds, to allow easy recycling of the components. This is part of a movement called Design for Environment (DFE). In the future, when given a choice, select a low-toxic, easily recyclable DFE phone.

Tom Watson: tom.watson@metrokc.gov. Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at www.kcecoconsumer.com

