

In Garbage City, trash is a way of life

By: Devereaux Bell October 24, 2014, 4:20 p.m.



Not far outside the main area of Cairo, Egypt, is their city of trash.

And the citizens of Garbage City, as it's called, are really quite happy. Only one question seems to worry them: Will they be able to keep making their livings by collecting Cairo's trash?

Different families in Garbage City focus on different types of trash. Some work with metals, some with plastic bottles, some with paper — sorting the items into stacks of “sellable” and “unsellable.” Anything that can be reused or recycled is saved. Carts pulled by donkeys pull the trash through the streets. These carts are stacked up to 10 feet high with recyclables.

These expert dumpster-divers are known as Zabbaleen, that's “garbage people” in Egyptian Arabic. They do an amazing job of recycling 80% of the waste they collect. The reason that's so amazing is that modern European and North American cities recycle only about 25-70% of the garbage they collect.

The Zabbaleen are seen by other Egyptians as outsiders — and not just because they collect trash for a living. Their ancestors migrated to Cairo about 80 years ago from upper (southern) Egypt. They are Christians in a city of Muslims. They are also pig-farmers in a culture that views pigs as filthy animals and as nasty to eat.

But these outsiders do Cairo a huge favor. For about 80 years, they've collected, sorted and disposed of the trash and garbage of one of the world's largest cities.

With a population of around 25 million, Cairo makes mountains and mountains of solid waste every day. And the city's 80,000 Zabbaleen are thankful for every bit of it, as are the many thousands of pigs that live among them. They feed the rotting food to the pigs, which makes the animals happy.

As you'd expect, it's a life of strong smells and sights, but the Zabbaleen don't mind. In fact, as they're proud to admit that they know more about this business than anyone.

That business, however, is always in danger of being taken away. The people of Cairo, even the government of Egypt itself, all seem to want the Zabbaleen gone.

Back in 2009, when swine flu was a health problem in many places, the Egyptian government decided to kill all of Egypt's pigs. They did this even though there was no swine flu in Egypt at that time. About 300,000 pigs were slaughtered. Since Muslims do not eat pork, the country's pig farms were mainly Zabbaleen and were all Christian. They became angry that Egypt took away their livestock. The World Health Organization agreed with

them, and said Egypt's decision did not make sense scientifically. The United Nations called the killing of Egypt's pigs "a real mistake."

Before long, the government admitted that the pig-slaughter wasn't really about preventing a swine-flu epidemic. It was the first move, they said, in a plan to "clean up" the Zabbaleen.

It wasn't the first time Egypt's government had tried this. A few years before, government officials decided to hire companies to collect Cairo's trash and garbage. They would replace the Zabbaleen. But the companies were not able to keep up with all the trash. They just weren't as good at the work as the Zabbaleen were.

A possible solution

The killing of the nation's pigs was a disaster for the Zabbaleen. They lost a major food source – their pigs. They had no reason to collect food garbage, since they had no pigs to eat it. Trash and garbage piled up on Cairo's streets.

The Zabbaleen have a suggestion. One simple change could make a huge difference — and possibly make everyone in Cairo happy.

They would like the people living in Cairo to just separate their organic waste (food garbage) from their inorganic waste (paper, plastic, glass). This would allow the Zabbaleen to continue picking up the city's waste and would also allow them to raise pigs farther away from the city.



Why would this work for the Zabbaleen? Well, the way they have fed their pigs in the past was a very slow process. While sorting through trash and garbage, they would pick out the bits of food waste and throw it over to their pigs. This would go on for hours as they sorted paper, plastic, metals, glass, and food garbage.

But if the people of Cairo want the pigs far from everyone, pig farms can be set up farther from the city. If the food garbage is already separated out, the Zabbaleen can just take that garbage directly to their pigs. The rest can be taken back to their "Garbage City" where they sort the paper, plastic, metals, and glass for recycling.

So far, the people of Cairo and the government have seemed uninterested. But as Cairo's garbage situation gets worse, it's possible that the Zabbaleen will get their way – and finally get some respect.

Adapted from online article at <http://www.mnn.com/lifestyle/recycling/stories/in-garbage-city-trash-is-a-way-of-life>

Name: _____ Hour: _____

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1-4. The Zabbaleen are not accepted by the people of Cairo. What are four things that cause them to be **viewed as outsiders** there?

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5. The government of Egypt first claimed that they killed pigs in 2009 because they wanted to prevent swine flu. What did they finally admit was **their real reason**?

6. The Zabbaleen do not charge for picking up trash. How do they make money from the trash?

7. What percent of the trash they collect do the Zabbaleen recycle?



8. The article says that European and North American cities recycle between 25%-70% of their trash. Are there recycling programs in your state? If so, **choose a nearby city in your state and find out what percent of the city's trash is recycled.** (City trash is often called "municipal solid waste" on web sites.) **Is the city doing a better job or a worse job than the Zabbaleen in how well they recycle? How do other U.S. cities compare?**