

Eco-Tip for 5/14/17

Auto Batteries: A Recycling Success With Room for Improvement

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Auto batteries are one of the biggest success stories of recycling and may represent a model for other material types. According to Battery Council International, an industry trade group, "More than 99% of all battery lead is recycled." This compares to just a 55% recycling rate for aluminum cans, making auto batteries "the most highly recycled consumer product."

Convenience is a major factor leading to this recycling rate. New batteries are purchased at locations where old batteries are accepted for recycling. Moreover, consumers are paid enough for their old batteries to provide an incentive for return of old batteries. Buttressing these pillars of stable recycling are mandates. State and federal laws require retailers to provide the convenience and assess a returnable deposit providing the incentive.

However, this battery lifecycle renewal through recycling is not a complete environmental success. Although recycling provides an answer for the lead, plastic, and acid components of a battery, the answer is not always perfect, as sadly illustrated by the environmental damage caused by a flawed battery recycling facility formerly located at Ormond Beach.

More importantly, even perfectly managed recycling requires energy, consumes resources, and creates some pollution. Far better than recycling a battery is to make existing ones last as long as possible. Part of this can be accomplished by buying a long-lasting, high-quality battery. Longevity can also be added through basic good practices.

We have come a long way since the days when auto battery maintenance required the addition of distilled water. Now, maintenance-free batteries in sealed cases handle constant power draws, such as alarms and radio pre-sets. Some batteries even support a frequent on/off engine cycle, triggered by a vehicle sensing of stops in traffic or at lights.

An article titled "Start Me Up," by Peter Bohr in a recent edition of the Auto Club's *Westways* magazine lists some of the causes of excessive drain on auto batteries. The most obvious cause is electronic devices, ranging from the car's own dome lights to cell phone chargers, drawing power from the car's battery while the car is parked. To avoid this problem, be aware of which plug-in power sources of your car continue to provide power when the car's ignition is off. Batteries can also be drained from too many short trips, which doesn't allow the alternator to recharge the battery; exposure to extreme temperatures; and long periods of inactivity.

Other potential parasites sucking power from your battery include dash cams and radar detectors, and some aftermarket remote start systems have been blamed for drawing excessive power.

Water leaks into electric components, shorting wiring, may also drain a battery. Some batteries fail simply because of a sticky relay, according to testingautos.com.

Nationwide Insurance is among auto web sites suggesting cleaning as another method to extend car battery life. Control corrosion by scrubbing terminals with “a toothbrush dipped in a baking soda and water mixture” which you should then clean off with a spray bottle and dry with a clean cloth. They also recommend keeping batteries firmly fastened to avoid short circuits caused by vibration.

Batteries are normally recharged by the alternator, which operates only when the engine is running. Vehicles, usually RV’s and motorcycles, stored for months without running can solve the power drain problem with a battery maintenance device, which plugs into a 12v outlet and keeps a battery viable following long periods between engine/alternator charges.

Several web sites, including testingautos.com, say an average auto battery lasts six years. New battery types, such as the absorbed glass mat technology incorporated into recent high-end models, represent continued progress.

Recycling your battery can now be taken for granted. You can do more by buying a longer-lasting battery and avoiding excessive wear.

Sources:

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