The concept of “reduce, reuse, and recycle” is gaining popularity among the business community. The increasing focus on recycling over the last decade may have created a perception among many people that the concept of recycling is man-made. However, people and businesses may increase their recycling if they realize that recycling is common in nature.

Some natural recycling is obvious to humans. Fallen tree leaves decompose and create a richer soil for other plants. Bacteria and fungi are food sources for worms and insects, which in turn are food for animals. Microbes break down organic materials and create the basic elements of soil. Earthworms create tunnels that let air and water into the ground. Lichens emit chemicals that break down rocks and wood. Holiday trees recycled in the woods create shelter for small animals; those deposited in lakes or reservoirs become habitat for fish, or they can be chopped and turned into mulch. Most people are familiar with composting, where food waste is saved and used as fertilizer for gardens. The entire food chain could be said to rely on various forms of recycling.

Water is also recycled in nature. This is known as the water cycle. Water on earth evaporates into the atmosphere from the heat of the sun and from rain and snow. Air currents move that atmospheric water, creating clouds, which move around the globe and create precipitation. "When precipitation falls over the land surface, it follows various routes. Some of it evaporates, returning to the atmosphere, and some seeps into the ground (as soil moisture or groundwater). . . . The rest of the water runs off into rivers and streams, and almost all of this water eventually flows into the oceans or other bodies of water, where the cycle begins anew (or, more accurately, continues)." Approximately one-third of the water that falls on land drains into oceans.

Recycling is understood by scientists in areas far less accessible to the layperson, even regarding the science of other planets. In the journal *Science*, author Elizabeth Pennisi says, "Once again, microbes are proving just how versatile they can be. Key players nearly everywhere—from deep-sea vents to termite guts, and perhaps even on the Red Planet—microbes carry out biochemical reactions that help recycle the elements of life, such as carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen." Mathematical models are used to study recycling in nature: "The salutary adaptive capacity of nature often claimed can no longer keep up the inevitable further technological growth. A solution may come from high-technology biological systems of life support designed on the basis of solid theoretical background. . . . A life system is referred to as closed if it recycles all its biological and technological wastes."

Other areas of natural science that study recycling include biology, chemistry, genetics, environmental science, astronomy, and physics. One area of study for physicists is the recycling of plutonium used in nuclear reactors.

School students learn about recycling in their classes and by participating in science projects. Resources abound for more information in books, magazines, television shows, video games, and the Internet. Recycling is something everyone can participate in regardless of age, education, or location. Teachers also have many resources to choose from in providing students information on the importance of recycling. For example, the Web site Education World (education-world.com) provides materials for a lesson titled "How Long Does Trash Last?"

A key educational point that businesses must continually make is that recycling happens all around us, even without our having to participate in it. From understanding this, it is a small step to understanding the importance of contributing in our own ways by recycling our human-made products.