



The Great Plastic Bag Plague

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They're ubiquitous. They accompany us home each time we shop. They swirl about our oceans, they cling to our trees, they drift down our city sidewalks, they adorn metal fences, they're consumed by animals.

They are an urban tumbleweed, a flag of the consumer era.

Each year across the world some 500 billion plastic bags are used, and only a tiny fraction of them are recycled. Most of them will have a short lifetime with a consumer -- they'll be used for the few minutes it takes to get from the store to home and then they're thrown away.

But what does "away" really mean? Plastic shopping bags can last up to a thousand years in a landfill. In the environment, they break down into tiny, toxic particles that become part of the soil and water. Fortunately, some communities in America have started taking serious action.

Stephanie Barger has seen what washes up on the shores of Southern California. The executive director of Earth Resource Foundation, Barger has helped clean up the sands of Orange County and has helped educate people about the effects of a society that embraces disposability.

For every bag, there's a cost. Environment California reports that plastic bags, and other plastic refuse that end up in the ocean, kill up to one million sea creatures every year, such as birds, whales, seals, sea turtles, and others. And the number of marine mammals that die each year because of eating or being entanglement in plastic is estimated at 100,000 in the North Pacific Ocean alone.

The Algalita Marine Research Foundation learned that "broken, degraded plastic pieces outweigh surface zooplankton in the central North Pacific by a factor of 6-1. That means six pounds of plastic for every single pound of zooplankton." Which means, when birds and sea animals or looking for food -- more often, they are finding plastic.

Our history with plastic bags is short but significant. The Film and Bag Federation, an industry group, reports that plastic sandwich bags were unveiled in 1957 and quickly became a part of our routine, with department stores adopting plastic shopping bags in the late '70s and supermarkets employing them by the early '80s.

Although bags are given out free these days, they are not without their costs. Retailers in the United States spend \$4 billion a year on plastic bags, which gets

passed on to customers as higher prices.

A global problem

According to Vincent Coob, founder of reusablebags.com, about 500 billion to 1 trillion plastic bags are used worldwide every year and are causing a global epidemic. The enormous demand for plastic bags ties into the surging global demand for oil -- plastic bags are made from ethylene, a petroleum byproduct. In the United States alone, an estimated 12 million barrels of oil is used annually to make plastic bags that Americans consume.

"Eliminating the use of disposable plastic bags is about more than just the environment," said Barger, "it is about health, sustainability, economics and focusing on what kind of quality of life we want."

A growing list of communities and countries are beginning to rethink their dependence on plastic bags. Already a complete or partial ban on the bags has been approved in Australia, South Africa, parts of India, China, Italy, Bangladesh and Taiwan.

Africa has seen an increasing problem with bags as Environmental News Network reports, "South Africa was once producing 7 billion bags a year; Somaliland residents became so used to them they renamed them "flowers of Hargeisa" after their capital; and Kenya not so long ago churned out about 4,000 tons of polythene bags a month."

In Asia, the bags were banned in 2002 in Bangladesh after they were considered to be major factors in blocking sewers and drains and contributing to the severe flooding that devastated the country in 1988 and 1998.

Taking a different route, in 2002, Ireland imposed a 15-cent tax on bags, which led to a rapid 90 percent reduction in use. Ireland uses the tax to help fund other environmental initiatives. Bags are also taxed in Sweden and Germany, and are set to be banned outright in Paris this year.

In the United States, Californians Against Waste estimate that Americans consume 84 billion plastic bags annually. The United States has been slow out of the gate in addressing the growing problem with plastic, but recently momentum has started for positive change.

Currently 30 rural Alaskan villages and towns have banned plastic bags. And in March the city of San Francisco became the first major municipality to ban the use of plastic bags, and nearby Oakland has followed suit, but not without controversy and litigation from industry groups.

Californians themselves discard about 19 billion bags each year. Over the years a growing coalition of environmental and consumer groups have been pushing for the state to take action.

This summer their work resulted in the passage of Assembly Bill 2449, which

requires all supermarkets, pharmacies and other large retail stores to provide bins to help consumers recycle.

While this is a step in the right direction, many who have been aggressive on the issue, see the law as a disappointment. "It is basically just fluff -- most big stores already have the recycling bins," said Barger.

Bryan Early, who works for the Sacramento-based Californians Against Waste, admitted the legislation was a compromise. With pressure from the grocery and plastics industries, the law includes a provision that takes away the rights of municipalities to put a tax on bags the way Ireland did.

Hence, San Francisco and Oakland's push to ban the bags entirely.

But the devil is in the details. The Oakland legislation (which would go into effect in January) requires large markets to use bags made of recyclable paper or "bioplastics" -- bags made from compostable materials like cornstarch.

But a supermarket trade group calling itself the Coalition to Support Plastic Bag Recycling has sued, saying that the ban in Oakland and San Francisco conflict with the state law requiring stores to have bag recycling programs.

The group argues that compostable bags and petroleum-based bags would be confused by consumers and the compostable bags would contaminate the plastics bags during the recycling process.

"We are wasting energy fighting about disposable bags," said Barger, "when we should be putting energy into educating people about reusable bags."

Alternatives vs. the solutions

While lawyers will hash out the details in Oakland, there is a lot we can do as consumer and advocates -- some approaches are better than others.

Compostable or bioplastic bags may seem like a good solution to the typical plastic ones, but Barger believes they are more of an alternative -- not a solution.

The bioplastics may be made from natural products, but they also may contain a whole bunch of chemicals we don't know about, said Barger. And since most of them will come from corn or soy, they'll also mean more use of farmland laden with petroleum-based pesticides and fertilizers and the same environmental and energy costs to truck the bags to market.

And, while the bags may not last a thousand years, they do break down slower than regular compost and could last up to six or eight months in the environment -- threatening wildlife just the same.

"Bioplastics is really just replacing one problem for another and doesn't address what is wrong with our throw-away culture," said Barger.

Neither paper nor plastic

Which brings us to the "paper or plastic" question. The best answer is really neither. Paper bags have their own environmental cost. According to Vincent Coob, 14 million trees were cut down in 1999 to produce 10 billion grocery bags for Americans. The production and shipping of the bags also contributes to global warming and air pollution.

The best alternative Barger and Early agree, are reusable bags and education -- lots of it. By purchasing a reusable cloth bag, consumers can save hundreds and perhaps thousands of plastic or paper bags.

If you can't afford one, then reusing a plastic bag for as long as possible and then recycling it (if you are lucky to live in California or the few other places that offer the service) is the best bet.

It is also important, Barger says, to educate grocery store managers and ask them to talk to their employees.

Political pressure helps, too. Ask your elected officials to consider legislation to impose bag taxes or bag bans.

Probably the best thing we can do, though, is change our behavior as consumers and begin valuing durability instead of disposability. "There is a crisis happening right now," said Barger. "We have got to stop the flow of plastic today. People really want some organization to fix this problem. But we are the only people that can fix it."

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