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The Problem with Plastic Bags

Where do your grocery bags really end up?

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The Problem with Plastic Bags

Plastic bags are everywhere. We use them throughout a product's lifecycle: for shopping, storing, and disposing. They're so ubiquitous that it's easy not to think about them, but have you ever considered where they all go and how that impacts the planet?

Photocredit: Flickr / Keng Susumpow

Scope of the Plastic Bag Problem



Photocredit: Flickr / taberandrew

Plastic Bags by the Numbers:

- **8%:** The yearly global oil that goes to producing plastics, causing untold environmental damage through its exploration, drilling, and transport.
- **Up to 1 trillion:** The number of plastic bags consumed worldwide annually.
- **21,000 pounds:** The weight of plastic bags entering US landfills daily.
- **1,000 years:** The amount of time it takes a plastic bag to decompose in a landfill.
- **1% to 6.5%:** The quantity of plastic bags recycled.

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- **\$4,000:** The cost to recycle 1 ton of plastic worth \$32 on the commodities market

Plastic bags are consumed in enormous quantities and very few of them actually get recycled. Unfortunately, many that are collected for recycling never actually get recycled because it's too expensive.

What Happens to Plastic Bags?



Photocredit: [Google Images](#) / [Wikimedia](#)

Though some plastic bags are combusted in waste-to-energy facilities to create electricity, a huge volume ends up in landfills. Worst still, many are not disposed of properly, and drift off of garbage barges, trash trucks, and out of landfills into wide open spaces (think how easy it is for a plastic bag to 'fly away'. In fact, an estimated 100 million tons of plastic debris is now floating in the ocean, and even more litters on-land ecosystems. Here is how plastic bags have had an impact on wildlife:

- Sea turtles and birds as well as land-based wildlife, mistaking them for food, eat plastic bags, causing intestinal blockages, suffocation, and death.
- Corals are blanketed by them, suffocating to death.
- Marine life is poisoned by phthalates, the chemical used to make plastic bags soft that seeps into oceans.

Ridding Your Life of Plastic Bags

So, how do you free yourself from the plague that is plastic bags? It may be easier than you think, here are some tips:

- 1. Get reusable bags:** Not just one or two! Have enough for your average trip to the grocery store, and keep several in various places so they're always handy:

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- In your purse (there are some super-small roll-up types that work fabulously)
- By your front or back door
- In your vehicle
- At the office



Photocredit: Flickr / Michael Francis McCarthy

2. Use alternatives for garbage: Stop using your plastic bags for the trash. Instead use an easy to clean garbage bin, or try switching to biodegradable plastic bags that are made of compostable corn-based materials, they work just as good!

3. Support plastic bag taxes: Usually set up by municipalities, these discourage shoppers from using plastic bags by adding a small extra charge for them at the time of purchase.

4. Shop at retailers that are bag-free: Local shops and big companies have either eliminated or vastly reduced the availability of plastic bags in their stores. Be a champion for change in your neighbourhood and encourage your local store to join the plastic bag-free movement!



Photocredit: Flickr / mastermaq

Why not challenge yourself to go plastic bag free for even just one week starting now! You'll feel great about it, and so will the planet.

About the Author:

Maryruth has been seeking the keys to environmental justice—both at home and at work—for over a decade. Growing up adjacent to wild spaces, Maryruth developed a healthy respect (and whimsical appreciation) for things non-human, but her practical mind constantly draws her down to earth to ponder tangible solutions to complex eco-problems. With interests that range

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from green living to green business, sustainable building designs to organic gardening practices, ecosystem restoration to environmental health, Maryruth has been exploring and writing about earth-matters for most of her life. Of special interest is the subject of ecopsychology and the role the natural world plays in the long-term health and well-being of humanity. You can learn more about Maryruth's work by [visiting her site](#).

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