

## Plastic Bags: Convenient and Cruel

They come in handy for carrying your groceries—or your lunch or your dirty sneakers. But are they worth it?

By Lauren Magaziner

Plastic bags are on the loose: They're floating through oceans, tumbling across deserts, and sliding along city streets. Humans use an estimated 1 trillion plastic bags every year. That's about 10 times the number of stars in the MilkyWay galaxy!

Yes, plastic bags are useful, but experts say they are wreaking havoc on the environment. Already, cities like San Francisco and Washington, D.C., have placed restrictions on the use of plastic bags.

Is it time to ban them for good?

### Poisonous Plastic

Most things you throw away—like food or paper—are **biodegradable**. Plastic, a material made by humans, is not. Though plastic bags will disintegrate over several decades, minuscule pieces of plastic remain.

In other words, plastic bags never really go away.

So where do the bags end up?

Some people put used plastic bags in the garbage to be taken to **landfills**. Other people mistakenly place them in general plastic **recycling** bins, and the bags end up damaging expensive machinery. (Plastic bags can't be recycled with other plastic items, like bottles and containers.) Most often, though, plastic bags blow away and get swept out to sea. And that is where they cause the most trouble.

In the ocean, marine animals mistake floating bags for food. Just one nibble can be deadly. Plastic bags can block the digestive tract, causing a slow and agonizing death. Other animals are strangled when bags wrap around their bodies. In all, thousands of marine animals—including sea turtles, seals, seabirds, dolphins, whales, and sharks—die each year because of plastic bags.

But marine animals aren't the only ones eating plastic. When the harmful chemicals in plastic **leach** into the ground or are ingested by land

or sea animals, the chemicals become part of our **food chain**. That means you may have unknowingly swallowed a bit of a plastic bag too.

So if plastic bags are so terrible, how did they end up in every store?

## Good Intentions

In 1977, when plastic bags were first introduced to shoppers, they seemed like a huge improvement over paper bags. They were cheaper to produce and less prone to break.

Plus, they seemed to be better for the environment. Paper bags are made by heating woodchips in a chemical solution. This process causes 70 percent more air pollution and 50 times more water pollution than the process used to make plastic bags.

Plastic bags are also more sanitary than reusable cotton or canvas bags, which can harbor harmful germs from raw meat and produce. A recent study showed that about 1 in every 10 reusable grocery bags contains bacteria that can make humans sick. (Supporters of a plastic bag ban are quick to point out that the solution is to wash reusable bags more often.)

Rather than banning plastic bags, some argue for limiting their use. Charging a fee per bag at the checkout counter, for instance, might encourage shoppers to use fewer bags. Stores could also offer bags made of more Earth-friendly materials, such as corn.

And why ban bags when we can reuse them? Ninety percent of Americans reuse their plastic bags at home for everything from lining trash cans to picking up dog poop.

It's clear that we love our plastic bags. But do they do more harm than good?

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