

Putting Plastic in its Place

It's a growing trend: In January, Los Angeles banned plastic shopping bags. San Francisco and more than 100 other cities and counties across the U.S. have similar laws, and California is considering a statewide ban. Some places that allow plastic bags now require shoppers who want them to pay a fee—a nickel or a dime, for instance.

That's because so much of the plastic we use ends up in landfills and waterways, where it can kill birds, fish, and other animals that get tangled in it and drown, or try to eat it and choke. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Americans generated 32 million tons of plastic waste in 2012 and recycled only 9 percent of it.

This has created a major environmental problem because plastic takes a long time to decompose. Unlike food waste, which decays and is gone in weeks or months, plastic takes decades, or even centuries, to break down.

Manufacturers and recyclers of plastic bags think the bans are misguided. They say that the bags can be recycled, and that 9 out of 10 Americans reuse them for things like packing lunch, lining trash cans, and picking up after their dogs. They also point out that more than 30,000 people across the U.S. have jobs related to plastic bag manufacturing and recycling. Bans jeopardize those jobs.

Some people worry that in focusing on plastic bags, we'll lose sight of the bigger picture—the many other ways we pollute the planet.

Even so, Seattle resident Robb Krehbiel thinks his city's plastic bag ban is a good idea. "It's not going to be a silver bullet that solves all our environmental problems," he says. "But my thinking is you do what you can, when you can, where you can."

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