



The Truth about Plastic Bags

Californians use 19 billion plastic bags every year. This generates over 147,000 tons of waste that ends up in landfills, local rivers and storm drains, and enters the ocean, killing marine life.

Although single-use plastic bags are designed to be used for only moments, plastic lasts hundreds of years or longer in the environment and may never truly biodegrade. Once discarded, the vast majority of plastic products end up in landfills, rivers and storm drains, and eventually the marine ecosystem, threatening wildlife. During just three hours on Coastal Cleanup Day in 2008, volunteers picked up 1.4 million bags.

We cannot recycle our way out of this problem: there just isn't a market for recycled bags in the US. In fact, the majority of plastic bags that are recovered to be recycled are sold to foreign markets, like China. Less than 5% of plastic bags distributed in California are currently recycled. In Los Angeles County, over 90% of the bags collected to be recycled ended up being shipped to a landfill rather than recycled, due to contamination and their tendency to jam recycling machinery.

Plastic Bags Destroy the Environment and Hurt Animals

Plastic bags don't biodegrade. Instead, they break down into smaller and smaller pieces of plastic when exposed to sunlight and water, but never truly go away. Inland and urban areas in particular are the most blighted by plastic bags as these urban tumbleweeds collect along roads, alleys and trees. They closely resemble jellyfish while floating in the water, and plastic bags or pieces of plastic bags are often mistaken for food by seabirds, marine mammals, fish and sea turtles

Plastic Bags Cost Us

Plastic litters our beaches, and costs us money to clean up. It even threatens California's \$43 billion coastal economy by making our beaches look like dumps. In San Francisco, a study estimated that it cost the city \$8.5 million each year to deal with plastic bag debris. That's almost 17 cents for every bag distributed. Add those cleanup costs to the cost of the plastic bags themselves, usually around 3-5 cents that is wrapped into the cost of food, and plastic bags don't look like such a bargain anymore.

What's the Solution?

Reusable bags are the way to go. A single reusable bag has the potential to replace over 1,000 single use bags in its lifetime. Recycling is simply not a solution—it is expensive and there is little to no market for the recycled plastic. Paper bags aren't an option either. Paper bags deplete natural resources, and paper making contributes to greenhouse gas emissions and water pollution. And while many companies are marketing compostable or biodegradable plastic bags, those aren't a solution either. In fact, in the ocean, biodegradable plastic bags act just like traditional plastic. They need the high heat and bacteria of an industrial composting facility to break down.

Convince Your Community

Support Heal the Bay's efforts to pass bag bans in cities and other small municipalities. Follow San Francisco's lead! To learn more, visit our Action Alert page. You can also participate in Day Without a Bag, which encourages holiday shoppers to end their dependence on plastic bags. More than anything, change the way you shop. Always bring your reusable bags, and if you forget, try to go without a bag all together. Your backpack can hold more groceries than you think!