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# Plastic Bag Pollution

by Sharon Jacobsen

*Every year, around 500 billion plastic bags are used worldwide. 500,000,000,000. Five hundred followed by nine zeros. That's a lot of bags. So many that over one million bags are being used every minute and they're damaging our environment.*

Big numbers can be daunting so let's put it another way. Every man, woman and child on our planet uses 83 plastic bags every year. That's one bag per person every four and half days. Of those 500 billion bags, 100 billion are consumed in the United States alone.

## Pollution

Plastic bags are difficult and costly to recycle and most end up on landfill sites where they take around 300 years to photodegrade. They break down into tiny toxic particles that contaminate the soil and waterways and enter the food chain when animals accidentally ingest them.

But the problems surrounding waste plastic bags starts long before they photodegrade. Our planet is becoming increasingly contaminated by our unnecessary use of plastic bags.

Big black bin liners, plastic carrier bags carrying advertising logos, clear sandwich bags and a variety of other forms are all polluting our environment. They're lightweight, handy and easily discarded. Too easily discarded.

While they were rarely found during the 60s and 70s, their usage has increased at an alarming rate since they became popular during the 80s. Just take a look around you. Plastic bags can be seen hanging from the branches of trees, flying in the air on windy days, settled amongst bushes and floating on rivers. They clog up gutters and drains causing water and sewage to overflow and become the breeding grounds of germs and bacteria that cause diseases.

## Dangers to Sea Life

Plastic bags are now amongst the top 12 items of debris most often found along coastlines ranging from Spitzbergen in the north to the Falklands in the south.

Animals and sea creatures are hurt and killed every day by discarded plastic bags - a dead turtle with a plastic bag hanging from its mouth isn't a pleasant sight but mistaking plastic bags for food is commonplace amongst marine animals. Plastic clogs their intestines and leads to slow starvation. Others become entangled in plastic bags and drown.

Because plastic bags take hundreds of years to break down, every year our seas become 'home' to more and more bags that find their way there through our sewers and waterways. Every bag that's washed down a drain during rainfall ends up in the sea - every bag that's flushed down a toilet (many small bags are), ends up in the sea - every bag that's blown into a river will most likely end up in the sea.

Add to that the enormous amounts of energy that's used every year in order to manufacture these bags and it's no surprise that pressure is being put on governments to make changes and consumers to re-think their attitudes.

## Pollution Taxes & Bans

Following the levy of taxes on plastic bags in Ireland, usage dropped by 90 percent. Several countries have already banned their use and more will doubtless follow.

While anything that lowers our consumption is good, why wait until we're hit financially before we change our habits when changes aren't difficult to make?

How about taking previously used bags with you next time you go to the shops? Or even better - turn back time and do as grandma did and take a sturdy bag with you every time you go shopping.

Shop-owners would much rather you use their bags as they're a convenient and cheap form of advertising, but what's more important, shareholder profits or the environment?

Plastic bags can be re-cycled although only about one in every 200 ever find their way to a re-cycling unit. Find out if there's a re-cycling bin near you and, if not, lobby your local authority for one.

## Greenhouse Gases

Some countries have introduced so-called "environmentally friendly plastic bags" that are biodegradable. These bags take about three years to break down into practically nothing and while that sounds like an attractive solution, the truth is that the process of breaking down these petrol based bags causes carbon to become methane which is a greenhouse gas.

It's also possible to get 'plastic' bags manufactured from corn. These break down very quickly and give off no more methane than any other corn product on landfill sites. Unfortunately, they're more expensive to produce and few shops use them.

Until a real alternative is freely available, the only solution is a re-think of attitude:

- Re-use bags when shopping.
- Choose biodegradable bags to use for litter (photodegradable bags used in this way are guaranteed to end up on landfill sites taking hundreds of years to break down).
- Re-use large plastic sacks whenever possible
- Refrigerate food in containers rather than plastic bags

## Garbage Bins

One question that's often raised in connection with the plastic bag dilemma is what should be used to line bins if not plastic bags?

To answer that, let's go back in time to when plastic bags were yet to become commonplace. There's no need to go any further back than the 70s. What did we do?

For one, we had far less garbage. Goods had much less packaging than is the case today so we didn't fill our bins as quickly. Peelings, eggshells, tea bags and coffee grounds were all composted, as was any paper that wasn't needed for lighting fires.

What was left went into an unlined bin with anything sloppy being wrapped in newspaper first.

If we choose carefully when shopping so as not to bring home more packaging than necessary - there's really no point in bringing it home just to throw it straight in the bin when we unpack - and keep a compost bin going, the amount of waste that goes into the kitchen bin will be halved, at least.

Now that we have re-cycling plants, even less will need to be binned. Tins, bottles and paper (we generally have too much for the compost heap these days) can all be delivered to the local re-cycling point.

If you really must line your bins, instead of buying plastic liners, it's possible to use newspaper. You won't be able to pull everything out, tie it up and put it out, of course, but you'll be able to tip it from your kitchen bin into the main bin without too much mess. People managed before; perhaps the comfortable lives we have today just make everything appear more difficult than it really is.

Obviously, if you live in an area where the garbage collectors expect to find bin liners neatly arranged along the edge of the street rather than the bins themselves, you'll have to continue using plastic bags. That doesn't mean to say you can't lobby your local authority for change, though. Explain why you need to leave the bin outside and that it's their duty to support any move that will improve the environment.

## Conclusion

By refusing to use plastic bags, you can make a huge difference to the pollution problem. Remember that each person uses about 83 bags a year. If there are four people in your family, that's 332 plastic bags less every year.

That's 332 bags less that will:

- Release toxins into the ground water from landfill sites
- Stay in the environment for hundreds of years while they break down
- Get into the food chain through animals that ingest small particles of plastic
- Waste energy during the manufacturing process
- Kill any of the estimated 100,000 marine animals that die each year of plastic pollution

These are all-important factors that have a profound affect on our environment and the creatures we share our planet with. Should we really put our own selfish needs before the needs of everything around us now and the lives of future generations? That's up to you to decide.