

# DON'T THINK OF A PLASTIC BAG!

*An action by Green Sangha*

## A love affair with plastic

- Shoppers worldwide are using 500 billion to 1 trillion plastic bags per year.<sup>1</sup> This translates to about a million bags every minute across the globe, or 150 bags a year for every person on earth. And the number is rising.<sup>2</sup>
- Californians use 19 billion plastic bags each year – enough to circle the earth over 244 times.<sup>3</sup> (This is equivalent to about 552 disposable plastic bags per person per year.)
- Americans used 2.4 million tons of LDPE (low-density polyethylene) for bags, sacks, and wraps in 2000. Only 4.3% of this material was recovered after use, according to the US EPA. In the United States, 96% of groceries use plastic bags and 7% offer *only* plastic.<sup>4</sup> Fewer than 5 percent of US shoppers use canvas, cotton, or mesh bags.<sup>5</sup>

## What does it matter?

Plastic items of all kinds present a significant and costly form of litter, pollution, and waste. Plastic litter on California streets, beaches, and parkways is more than just an aesthetic blight. Eventually most non-degradable plastic litter will find its way into the storm drain system and into the marine environment. **Even plastic that gets “thrown away” does not always make it to the landfill, but rather gets diverted by wind or improper handling.**

EPA has mandated that California communities reduce and ultimately eliminate the flow of trash, particularly non-degradable plastic trash, into the marine environment. Yet on Coastal Cleanup Day in 2004, in Marin County alone a thousand volunteers picked up 10,579 pounds of trash from bay, creek, and ocean shorelines. The majority of this trash is plastic: plastic fishing line, plastic bags, plastic toys, plastic containers, plastic bottles, plastic bits.

## Why pick on plastic bags?

- **Single-use bags use up natural resources and energy.** Plastic bags are made from polyethylene. Polyethylene comes from petroleum, a nonrenewable resource. When one ton of plastic bags are reused or recycled, the energy saved is equal to 11 barrels of oil. An estimated 3 million barrels of oil are required to produce the 19 billion plastic bags used annually in California. Only a few plastic carry-out bags use recycled content; most of those contain only around 5% recycled material.
- **Plastic bags are indestructible.** Plastic bags take between 20 and 1000 years to break down in the environment. Even when they do break down they are not really gone. Plastic bags do not bio-degrade. They simply break apart into ever smaller pieces, eventually forming “plastic dust.” No matter how large or small they are, plastic bits are not digestible by any creature on land, in the air, or under the sea. We are literally choking the planet with products, which cannot re-enter the life cycle.
- **Plastic bags and packaging kill marine life.** More than 1 million birds, more than 100,000 whales, seals and turtles, and countless fish worldwide are killed by plastic rubbish every year. These deaths occur through entanglement, suffocation, and starvation by ingestion. A Minke whale found on a beach in Normandy in April of 2002 had approximately 2 pounds of plastic bags and packaging in its digestive tract.

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<sup>1</sup> Greenwire, Environment and Energy Publishing LLC. July 22, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, Caroline. Battle of the Bag. New Scientist, September 11, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Based on studies of the use of plastic bags in other nations (Australia, Ireland, Taiwan and England)

<sup>4</sup> Food Marketing Institute.

<sup>5</sup> Pennsylvania Resources Council.

- **Plastic is getting into the food chain.** Even the finest particles of plastic represent a threat to creatures at the lowest level of the food chain in the marine environment, the filter-feeders. Then, toxins in filter-feeders are passed up the food chain to fish and other marine animals, which humans then consume.
- **Plastic could over-run our planet if we don't stop.** Estimates run as high as one million pieces of plastic per square kilometer floating in specific areas of the Pacific Ocean. In this area, plastics outnumber plankton, the base of the marine food web.<sup>6 7</sup> A surface trawl of the ocean found 6 pounds of plastic pieces for every one pound of zooplankton.

### **But plastic bags are so convenient!**

It depends on how far you are looking. A plastic bag may be convenient for a minute or two when you carry something out of the store, but for the rest of the life of the bag (which is a long time) it is not just inconvenient, it is ugly, toxic, and life-threatening. There are alternatives to plastic bags, many of which were used by our parents and grandparents quite handily. Some ideas are suggested below.

### **What can I do?**

1. Learn more about the impact of plastic packaging.
2. Begin today to limit, and then eventually stop, your consumption of plastic bags.
3. Know your alternatives. They are there. Many are *more* convenient. (See "Alternatives" below.)
4. Use your alternatives, and let people know why. Give them this fact sheet or other materials on the costs of plastic to our personal and planetary health.
5. Develop an iron will and a heart of gold. Refuse to accept plastic bags from clerks who habitually stuff your purchases into the standard packaging. Smile when you do it. "I'm sorry, I can't use plastic bags – they're choking our waterways and killing marine animals."

### **Alternatives to plastic bags**

- Take alternative carry-out bags with you, made from all-natural fibers: jute, hemp, woven cotton, and canvas are all available.
- Use, and re-use, brown paper bags for fresh produce and bulk items such as beans and rice.
- Use *no* bags – simply pick things up and put them in your shopping basket (this works for large items such as apples, bananas, carrots, melons, etc.).
- "Green" plastic bags, made from plant fibers, are starting to come on the market. While preferable to hydrocarbon plastics, green plastic bags still carry the liabilities of blow-away litter, storm drain blockage, and wildlife fatalities, because they take time to decompose. Like all single-use products, these bags belong to the "throw-away-and-dump" approach, which is overtopping our landfills and taxing our resource base.

Two large canvas bags of premium quality cost about \$30, and should last about 10 years. If plastic bag fees, under consideration in some California communities, are instituted at a conservative 15 cents/bag, a family switching from four plastic shopping bags per week will recover its purchase cost in the first year. In the nine years following, an additional \$30 per year will be saved.

### **References**

Many of the facts and ideas here are adapted from "Fact Sheet on the Impacts and Volume of One-time use Disposable Grocery Bags," by Californians Against Waste, January 2005 ([www.cawrecycles.org](http://www.cawrecycles.org).) To learn more about plastics in the ocean, visit [www.algalita.org](http://www.algalita.org).

**Green Sangha is a spiritual community dedicated to environmental action.**

**Groups are based in Marin County, the East Bay, and beyond (start one in your community!)**

**We meet monthly to meditate, educate, support one another, and perform environmental actions.**

**[www.greensangha.org](http://www.greensangha.org) (510) 532-6574**

<sup>6</sup> The Independent (London) March 5, 2002, Charles Arthur.

<sup>7</sup> Government of South Australia, Zero Waste SA.