

Plastic Bags: Is There an End in Sight?

Let's Free The World Of Plastic Bags!

> By Ada Letelier. Published On: Mon, Aug 3rd, 2009.

Nothing upsets me more than the sight of plastic bags swinging from trees and/or bushes, cluttering up the landscape, as I drive along a highway, whether it is here in Chile, back home in the states and/or on the varied highways I have crossed while traveling by car in Europe. While visiting China I did not see one plastic bag anywhere. But then again, they were in the throes of beautifying the country for the 2008 Summer Olympics.

"I have counted 53 plastic bags already," I say. I am met with a stony stare from my husband, who says, "Here we go again. Please don't spoil this trip for us."

"Me?" I say. "Me, spoil the trip?! I am not the one spoiling the trip. It's those people who don't care about our planet that are spoiling this trip, not me. Where do these people think these bags are going to end up? Who do they think is going to clean up the mess that we are leaving behind for future generations? Don't they read? Even if we recycled these darn bags, we still have a problem."

Plastic bags are one of the substances that take the longest to decompose, if that! Scientific estimates range anywhere from 20 to 1,000 years. And they also account for up to 50 percent of all the trash found in landfills.

"And while I'm on the subject, did you know that we are running out of space for landfills. Since we stopped burning our garbage . . . blah, blah, blah." I looked over at my husband. "Okay," I say. "I'll shut up for now and let you drive in peace. But this isn't over yet. If it's the last thing I do, I will live to see the end of the plastic bag as we know it today."

"Yes, dear." he said, "Where would you like to eat lunch?"

"Any place," I said, "as long as they don't use plastic utensils!"

"Yes, dear."

So how did we get into this predicament in the first place? After all, plastic bags really haven't been around for that long. Fifty-nine years to be exact. Two Canadians, Harry Wasylyk and Larry Hansen, invented the first disposable green polyethylene garbage bag for industrial use in the 1950's — garbage bags are made from low density polyethylene, which was invented in 1942.

The patent was later sold to Union Carbide Company. The company manufactured the first green garbage bags under the name Glad Garbage Bags for home use in the late 1960's (About.com Inventors, by Mary Bellis). And it wasn't until the early 1980's (1982 to be exact) when two of the United States' largest shopping chains — Safeway and Kroger — started replacing paper bags with plastic bags to bag shopper's groceries at their check-out counters that plastic bags became a staple of American life. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Today, only 59 years after the invention of the single-use plastic bag, countries around the world are scrambling to find solutions that will help them control their use; some countries have

eliminated them altogether. There are those who feel strongly that plastic bags are not the real problem and that if we are truly serious about wanting to do something to save the environment, then we must first stop buying bottled water, only buy local produce, support farmers' markets (these last two in an effort to reduce our carbon-footprints) and last but not least, stop driving.

And while I concur with these sentiments, one has to begin somewhere; and my somewhere is with those who argue that eliminating the plastic bag from our lives is not only a good place but also an easy place to start.

Some Background Information:

Plastic bags:

1. Were once thought to be an ecologically friendly alternative to cutting down trees for the manufacture of paper bags.
2. Clutter our attics, cupboards and kitchen drawers.
3. Are said to be the longest lasting form of trash material next to styrofoam – which never decomposes.
4. Top the list as one of the many causes of pollution.
5. Make up to 50 percent of the rubbish found in our waste lines.
6. Go by various names: t-shirt bags, carrier bags, single use bags.
7. Are thrown away every year worldwide after being used only once before being discarded. The latest estimate is five hundred billion plastic bags a year.
8. Are made from a substance called polyethylene. Low density polyethylene was invented in 1942. Low density polyethylene is soft, stretchable, and water and air proof.
9. Take up huge amounts of space in the world's landfills.
10. Less than 1 percent of used plastic bags are recycled (1999 estimate).

Impact on the Environment:

1. Plastic bags that choked the drainage system in Bangladesh were said to be one of the major factors contributing to the 1988 and 1989 floods which submerged 2/3's of the country. As a direct result of this, Bangladesh has outlawed the use of plastic bags since 2002.
2. Plastic bags kill large numbers of wildlife and livestock when they get caught in fences, trees, bushes and are mistakenly eaten by these animals leading to suffocation or blockage of the digestive track.
3. In marine environments plastic bags are responsible for the deaths of marine birds, sea turtles, dolphins, seals and whales who mistake the plastic bag for jellyfish. They ingest the bags and then die from intestinal blockage; some starving to death because plastic in an animal's gut can prevent digestion and lead to a slow and painful death.
4. Sailors report that plastic bags are the most common man-made item seen at sea.

5. In South Africa, plastic bags are called the “national flower” because so many can be seen flapping from fences, bushes and trees.

6. The abundant litter caused by plastic bags in China’s streets, parks, fields and streams is referred to as “white pollution.”

7. The “doldrums” is an area of the world’s oceans that have become the final resting place of much of the world’s floating junk, with plastic bags having a clear presence.

8. Estimates for how long it takes a single plastic bag to decompose range from 20 to 500 years. Some scientists put the estimate at 1,000 years, even though plastic bags have not been around that long. Estimates vary widely depending on the type of plastic being referred to — biodegradable or non-biodegradable plastic.

International Statistics*:

1. Chileans use an estimated 250 million plastic bags a month. 90 percent of these bags end up in waste disposal sites.

2. The Chinese use 3 billion carrier (plastic) bags every day. They also consume 37 million barrels of crude oil each year to manufacture more than 1 trillion plastic bags.

3. The United Kingdom goes through 10 billion bags a year. People surveyed say they use the plastic bags only once before disposing them. People also admitted to using roughly eight bags per week.

4. The United States uses 100 billion plastic bags yearly requiring an estimated 12 million barrels of crude oil each year. The average American family accumulates 60 plastic bags in only 4 trips to the grocery store.

5. Worldwide 500 billion plastic bags are used each year.

*Due to major changes in the laws (beginning in 2002) regarding the use of plastic bags in these countries, these statistics have changed considerably. They are used here to draw attention to the enormity of this problem as it existed prior to cries from environmentalists that something needed to be done to reverse these trends.

World-wide Efforts to Help Combat This Problem: Recycling, Taxing, Banning.

Africa – Many African countries are either taxing or banning the use of plastic bags. These countries include Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda.

Australia – consumes about 6.9 billion plastic bags a year. They have levied a Plas-tax in order to control usage.

Bangladesh – has imposed an outright ban on the use of plastic bags.

Brazil – instead of banning them outright, Brazil has embarked on a massive recycling effort to turn plastic bags into new products with different applications. In Rio de Janeiro they have banned the plastic bag and have returned to paper ones while embarking on a major educational program to encourage its citizens to consider using other reusable alternatives.

Chile – Congress has passed a bill restricting the use of non-biodegradable plastic bags at all Chilean supermarkets and department stores. It will become law in 2011. Along with this bill the government has embarked upon an educational campaign entitled “Less Bags and More Environment” aimed at bringing a halt to the use of plastic bags by the general public and replacing them with cloth ones.

China – Chinese law limits the production, sale and use of ultra-thin plastic bags (less than 0.025 mm). Further, this new law bans all supermarkets and retail stores from giving out free plastic bags to customers. If customers want a plastic bag they will have to pay for it. Plastic bag usage has been reduced by 66 percent since passage of this new law. Critics say, however, that it is not being enforced uniformly across the country. It is, however, to yours truly, a great start.

India – the capital city of Mumbai has banned the use of non-biodegradable plastic bags along with (New) Delhi where they use 10 million bags a day. There are stiff fines for anyone using non-biodegradable plastic bags. Although biodegradable bags decompose faster, the problem still persists with the large numbers of bags being used and thrown away on a daily basis.

Ireland – used to consume 1.2 billion bags a year (2002 estimate). However, with the introduction of the Plas-Tax in 2002, plastic bag usage has been reduced by 90%.

Japan – uses 30 billion plastic bags a year (2006 estimate). They are presently taxing but not banning the use of plastic bags.

Modbury, UK – BECAME THE FIRST PLASTIC FREE TOWN IN EUROPE IN 2007. No recycling, no taxing, just no plastic bags, period!

Spurred on by Modbury native Rebecca Hoskins, a wildlife camerawoman, and a video she made documenting the horrors of plastic pollution on marine animals, the whole town agreed to stop providing or selling plastic bags and switch to environmentally friendly alternatives. (www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2 – Plastic Bags and the Environment, July 7, 2008).

Russia – has levied a Plas-Tax along with no more free plastic bags at all retail stores.

United Kingdom – is using a combination of bans and taxes in order to reduce the number of plastic bags used in the country.

United States – before becoming the only major US city to ban plastic bags (Nov. 2007) San Franciscans used 180 million bags a year. Other states and cities nation-wide have begun to impose plas-taxes and some are considering outright bans.

However, these options are still in the planning stages and many have still to be approved by local legislatures. Wake-up America, what are you waiting for? Wal-Mart International – has pledged to reduce the use of plastic bags by 50 percent at all of its stores world-wide by the year 2013.

What Individuals Can Do:

1. Just Say No.
2. Look for alternative ways to carry your groceries or purchases.
3. Re-use your plastic bags.

4. Do not double or triple bag your groceries. Bring and reuse the bags from your last shopping trip.
5. Join local and region-wide recycling efforts.
6. Hold lobby meetings and put the elimination of plastic bags on your agenda.
7. Start a “down with plastic bags” movement in your place of residence and-or work place.
8. Resolve to reduce the number of plastic bags you use during the week until you get down to zero plastic bags.

Sometime later my husband came home and said, “I brought you a surprise .”

“What surprise?” I asked.

“Just look at the shopping cart, it’s in there .”

“I don’t see anything, except groceries,” I said.

“That’s the surprise,” he said, “no plastic bags.” “I told them to put the groceries inside my shopping cart and that I didn’t want any plastic bags.”

Now if my husband can take such a bold step, trust me, you can too!

And to Jonas Salk, who coined the phrase, “our greatest responsibility is to be good ancestors,” let’s begin our journey of becoming good ancestors for future generations by conscientiously doing what we know needs and can be done right now, today. We have no time to waste. Neither does planet Earth!