

The Spreading Plastic Problem

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Plastic has spread all over the world. It is used for everything from packing fruit to containing water, from packing meat to plastic bags. Plastic bags have spread across society like wildfire with over 1.2 trillion being given out/sold per year — far more than the 6.5 billion population of the world.

This vast number of plastic bags is completely excessive when put beside the population of the world: there is no need for some many times the population of the world when a vast amount of the world has no access to such bags because of acute poverty. We, in the rich western world, need not use such a huge number of plastic bags when there have been perfectly usable (and reusable) bags made out of sustainable materials around for millennia, and are still in use in many other places in the world. Even plastic bags can be reused, and not instantaneously thrown into a rubbish bin, something that would alone massively reduce the number of plastic bags going to landfill, and in turn the number produced. There is no reason why plastic bags are inherently less reusable than bags made of other material. You're under no obligation to get rid of them straight away. Use them again.

When plastic bags do go to landfill, they stay there for millennia, unable to decay from their man-made structure. Reducing the amount of plastic would massively reduce the amount of non-biodegradable waste going to landfill. Why should we wreck the planet with something we ourselves created due to an ultimately fatal desire for hygiene and over-packaging? We have perfectly good alternatives to plastic — paper for packing most food, cloth for bags — and we rarely need as much material as we currently use anyway. Is it really worth destroying the planet for the sake of not having to carry a bag down to the shops? Landfill has a maximum capacity, even if we destroy forests and cities to make space or me. We will sooner or later have to think about how to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill. We should change our ways now, and not wait until we have no choice. Plastic isn't recyclable (beyond the already moulded shape itself being reused), and the only realistic alternative

to landfill is incineration, and surely there is already enough concern about global warming for us not to make the situation even worse than it is already by burning tons of toxic plastic year after year. The only realistic solution is to use plastic less. We survived without it for tens of thousands of years. We can again.

It isn't just littering that kills animals, but waste blown away from landfill too, 47% of which is plastic. This waste can kill everything from the smallest of birds to the largest of whales. It's a slow and horrible way to be killed: once you've eaten the plastic, it just stays in your stomach, unable to be broken down by even the strongest of acids, leaving your stomach full and unable to eat any more, slowly starving to death. Would you like to be forced to stop eating until you die? Should you really force some other creature to go through this horrendous pain? Most other ways of killing any creature at all, yet alone so painfully, are illegal! Why should this be any different?

Rebecca Hosking, while working for the BBC filming in the Pacific in 2006, came across albatrosses, turtles, and dolphins all dying because of plastic. After returning to the UK, she convinced all the local shops in her home town, Modbury, to stop giving out plastic bags and instead have cloth bags available. London Councils is proposing a London-wide ban of plastic bags, though this is yet to go through parliament (as the councils themselves do not have the power to ban them): a similar initiative by councils eventually lead to the banning of smoking in public places.

In conclusion, there are plenty of ways we could wreck our planet, many of which we are already doing, and we don't need to make any of them, especially proliferation of litter, any more of a problem than they already are. We're close to a tipping point, after which the quantity of non-biodegradable waste, a large proportion of which is plastic, becomes an unmanageably big issue. For the sake of our world, can we not just use other materials, and reuse what plastic items we already have? What's wrong with your old plastic bag anyway?

Sources:

- <http://www.messageinthewaves.com/action.php>
- John Vidal, The Guardian, Friday November 23 2007