

# Say "No" to Plastic and Paper!

by Alexandra, Carson and Colter Lasley

**O**ur Natural Beauty columnist, Carmen McManus, has arranged to replace her column this month with this eco-sensitive piece. The authors are local children who are passionate advocates of the environment. For more information, contact Carmen at Bloom Organics, 2065 Siesta Drive, 941-362-4194.

Do you stop and think about the effect plastic and paper bags have on the environment? It is estimated that more than 500 billion plastic bags are used globally every year... more than one million a minute! About one percent of that, or five billion plastic bags, end up as windblown litter. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, in the United States alone, approximately 100 billion plastic bags are used annually. Paper bags are less common, but the numbers are just as startling; Americans use approximately one million paper grocery bags every hour. Neither choice of bags is a good or a green choice in the end, and here's why...

Introduced about 25 years ago, plastic bags rapidly became the norm. We use them everyday – at the grocery store, the shopping mall, the bookstore, the list goes on and on. However, did you know that these bags take approximately 1,000 years to biodegrade? Did you know that only one percent are recycled every year? All the rest are thrown away and taken to landfills or become scattered throughout landscapes and waterways, where they eventually break down into toxic little pieces that poison the soil and water. Windblown plastic bags are so prevalent along the coast of Africa that the locals have begun weaving the bags into hats and other apparel.

Do you know what it feels like to get strangled by a plastic bag? The Environmental Protection Agency, Environmental Literacy Council, the Ocean Conservancy, along with other organizations, state that plastic bags (plastic, metal, or anything that wasn't originally part of the oceans, for that matter) pose a huge threat to all marine life. Hundreds of thousands of marine animals and countless land animals die each year. Their deaths are caused by suffocation or starvation from eating or getting tangled in plastic bags.

Did you know that there are masses of plastic bags and debris in our oceans? According to oceanographer Curtis Ebbesmeyer, there is an area roughly the size of Texas made up of plastic bags and debris in the Pacific Ocean. Google "plastic mass



in Pacific Ocean," and see for yourself what happens to ocean creatures when they ingest our plastic waste!

The manufacturing and disposal of plastic bags uses large quantities of non-renewable resources, especially petroleum. According to the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), 11 barrels of oil are saved when one ton of plastic bags are reused or recycled. One ton is equivalent to around 132,000 plastic bags. The petroleum used in 14 plastic bags can drive a car a mile. Can you imagine how many barrels of oil can be saved?

Now, let's talk about paper bags. Yes, they are biodegradable and, yes, they are from a renewable resource. However, they are most certainly not better for the environment. Compared to plastic, making paper bags emits 70 percent more global warming gases, creates 50 times more water pollution, uses four times more raw materials, and consumes 3.5 times the energy! And about 80 percent of paper bags end up in landfills, which means that 20 percent is either recycled or ends up as litter. In landfills, paper bags do not biodegrade like they would naturally because of a lack of oxygen, water, and sunlight. According to the EPA, the United States in 1997 alone used 10 billion paper bags. That means around 14.8 million trees that could have provided oxygen for humans were cut down.

So, what are people doing with this information? Numerous governments are installing taxes on bag usage or banning them altogether. Ireland's PlasTax decreased

consumption by 90 percent and raised over \$9 million for environmental management projects. A number of countries in Africa have banned plastic bags completely (because of ocean currents, African coastlines are choked with our plastic waste). In our own country, San Francisco has banned both plastic bags and bottles. Some other cities, including Boston, are considering the same bans. Some retailers are rewarding people who bring their own bags or they are introducing charges for using plastic or paper bags.

What can you do? You can recycle the plastic and paper bags you use, or better yet, you could use cloth bags instead of plastic and paper. And if you do choose to use plastic, think of ways to reduce the amount you use. For example, do you really need your laundry detergent bagged when it already has a handle? And do you ever really need to be "double-bagged"? In fact, do you even need a bag? Reduce consumption, become educated, encourage restrictions, and spread the word. Write letters to your local government or retailers asking them to consider a ban on bags or to introduce a charge or tax on them. They might even give credit to people who bring their own bags! Go green!

Help the planet for future generations by being eco-sensitive and personally responsible for your ecological footprint. Becoming educated and limiting consumption are the first steps in reducing waste. Ask yourself, "Is this purchase a want or a need?" If it is a need, select products with minimum or no packaging which are grown or produced in an environmentally sensitive manner. Be responsible. Our future is at stake!

Here are some great sites to visit for more info: [www.enviroliteracy.org](http://www.enviroliteracy.org), [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov), [www.reusablebags.com](http://www.reusablebags.com), [www.slate.com/id/2169287/?GT1=10135](http://www.slate.com/id/2169287/?GT1=10135), [www.reusablebags.com/facts.php](http://www.reusablebags.com/facts.php), and [www.chrisjordan.com](http://www.chrisjordan.com).

**Alexandra, 13, Colter, 11, and Carson, 9, became interested in this subject through a homeschooling assignment designed by their mother Leigh. As they researched the impacts, they were astounded and disgusted and wanted to take action. The family has stopped using plastic shopping bags as much as possible and encourages you to do the same.**

