



Saving Earth One Bag at a Time

Have you ever heard of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch? It is a place in the Pacific Ocean where a large amount of trash circles in a current. This mass of debris is at least twice the size of Texas. It has been growing for more than fifty years. Oceanographers say that the garbage is 90 percent plastic. It weighs about one hundred million tons. The most common kind of trash floating there is plastic shopping bags. How did they all get there? All water flows downhill until it reaches the sea. Plastic bags that fall to the ground end up in water. That water ends up in the ocean.

The Garbage Patch is an environmental disaster. Ocean animals mistake pieces of plastic bags for food. They fill their stomachs with plastic. It does not pass through their guts as waste. The animals slowly starve to death. Yet scientists do not know of any way to clean up the mess. The only thing we can do is keep it from getting bigger.

What can you do to help? Stop using plastic bags! This would help our Earth in several ways. Like all plastic products, the bags are made with petroleum. The amount of petroleum used in fourteen plastic bags could drive a car a mile. Yet 380 billion plastic bags are thrown away each year just in the United States. That means millions of barrels of oil are used up in making the bags. And lots of those bags will end up in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

But using paper bags instead of plastic ones is *not* the answer. Making a paper bag releases 70 percent more global-warming gases than making a plastic bag. Eight out of every ten paper bags end up in landfills. Yet paper bags do not **biodegrade** there. Why? There is not enough oxygen. Without oxygen, bacteria cannot live. The paper bags need bacteria in order to decay. So paper bags, while useful for fifteen minutes, sit in landfills and take up space for hundreds of years.



Make a decision that you will never throw any bag into the trash. Each time you toss out a bag, you throw away natural resources. We cannot get them back. Plus, cities spend about 17 cents to dispose of each plastic or paper bag. This uses millions of tax dollars. That money could be spent in other ways. It might help the poor, make new jobs, or clean up the environment. New York City says that if each New Yorker used just one less bag per year, it would save \$250,000!

What's the solution? When you run into the store to get just one or two items, tell the cashier, "I don't need a bag." If you do have your items bagged, return the bags to the store for recycling. Most stores have bins in which you can put used plastic or paper bags from any retailer. Some curbside recycling bins accept paper

bags, too. Recycling bags uses less energy and materials than making them from scratch. Best of all, use bags made of fabric or canvas. Take these reusable bags into the store. Have your items put into them. You can use these bags many times before they need to be cleaned and hundreds of times before they'll need to be replaced. Most importantly, they will not end up in the sea.