



## 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 an enormous amount of trash circles in a current. This mass of debris, which is at least twice the size of Texas, has been forming for more than fifty years. Oceanographers estimate that the garbage is 90 percent plastic and weighs approximately one hundred million tons. The most common kind of trash floating there is plastic shopping bags. How did they all get there? Consider this: All water flows downhill until it reaches the sea. Plastic bags that fall to the ground eventually end up in water—water that ends up in the ocean.

This is an environmental disaster. Sea turtles, sea birds, and other ocean animals mistake pieces of plastic bags for food. They fill their stomachs with plastic that may not pass through their intestines 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 growing.

What can you do to help? Stop using plastic bags! This would help our Earth in multiple 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 in the United States alone. That means millions of barrels of oil are used up for something that gets tossed out after a single use. Even worse, lots of those billions of 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. There is not enough oxygen. Without oxygen, the bacteria that would normally break down paper bags cannot live. So paper bags, while useful for fifteen minutes, sit in landfills taking up space for centuries.



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 that we cannot reclaim. Cities spend about 17 cents to dispose of each plastic or paper bag. This uses millions of tax dollars that could be spent in other ways, such as helping the poor, creating new jobs, or cleaning up the environment. In fact, New York City estimates that if each New Yorker used just one less bag per year, it would save the city \$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 paper or plastic bags to the store for recycling. Most stores have bins in which you can deposit used plastic or paper bags from any

retailer. Some curbside recycling bins accept paper bags, too. Recycling bags uses fewer resources than creating them from scratch. Best of all, use bags made of fabric or canvas. Take these reusable bags into the store, and have your items put into them. You can use these bags many times before they need to be laundered and hundreds of times before they'll need replacement. Most importantly, they will never end up in the ocean.