



Saving Earth One Bag at a Time

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

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is an environmental disaster unlike any other. Sea turtles, sea birds, and other ocean animals consume pieces of plastic bags, thinking they are food. The animals fill their stomachs with plastic that may not pass through their intestines, causing them to slowly starve to death. Unfortunately, scientists do not know of any way to clean up this mess, which means that the only thing we can do is keep it from growing even larger.

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, and the amount of petroleum in fourteen plastic bags could drive a car a mile. Yet 380 billion plastic bags are thrown away annually in the United States. Something that gets tossed out after a single use consumes millions of barrels of oil—a natural resource we are close to depleting. Even worse, many of those bags will end up in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

But using paper bags instead of plastic ones is *not* the answer. For one thing, making a paper bag releases 70 percent more global-warming gases than making a plastic bag. For another, 80 percent of paper bags end up in landfills where they do not **biodegrade** because 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, take up space in landfills for centuries.



Right now, 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. In addition, municipalities spend approximately 17 cents to dispose of each bag, using millions of tax dollars that could be spent to help the poor, create jobs, or clean up the environment. 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 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 for you to deposit used plastic or paper bags from any retailer. Some curbside

recycling bins also accept paper bags. 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 packed in 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.