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Plastic Bag Problems

There are over five trillion plastic bags produced every year, which is enough to encircle the earth seven times over. Of that five trillion only one to three percent are recycled, leaving 4.9 trillion bags floating around polluting the scenery, environment, and animals (The World Counts). This problem didn't appear out of nowhere, but manifested in 1965 with a Swedish company called Celloplast producing the design that all modern shopping bags are based on. This plastic bag first debuted in American grocery store checkout lines by the late 1970s, but it wasn't until 1982 when Safeway and Kroger (two of the country's largest supermarket chains) switched from paper to plastic that plastic bags really started to gain traction. Plastic bags were a hit with businesses due to the fact that they cost a quarter of the price of a paper bag, so by the time 1985 rolled by, seventy-five percent of U.S. grocery stores carried plastic bags. As of today eighty percent of grocery stores and convenience stores have switched to plastic bags (Petru).

The negative environmental effects of plastic bag use was immediate, but didn't draw much interest until the 1997 discovery of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. By the early 2000's different parties began to place bans or restrictions on the use of plastic bags (Petru). Foreign examples are Bangladesh's ban in order to reduce flooding caused by plastic bags blocking drains and Ireland's fifteen cent fee for plastic bags, which reduced the use by ninety percent in three months. More locally California signed a bill into a law that placed a ban on single-use

plastic bags, which came into effect on July 1, 2015. While California is the most drastic with their ban, other states such as Delaware, Maine, New York, North Carolina, and Rhode Island have worked to reduce plastic bag use through increased awareness, recycling, and promotion of alternate packaging (NCSL).

This plastic problem is the direct effect of rampant consumerism without the thought of repercussions, both present and future. Currently the amount of plastic bags floating around in the environment is causing many problems. An estimated ten percent of plastic bags end up in the ocean, contributing to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and threatening ocean biodiversity by choking many ocean creatures when they mistake them for food and when one species begins to die at an abnormal rate, every other living organism is impacted. The other ninety percent ends up on land where it is still just as deadly. Not only does it create a major eyesore, but also kills many land animals, and inhibits soil nutrients (Wagner). These direct consequences combined with the oil and carbon dioxide used and produced in its manufacturing is a major threat to the stability of our ecosystem and will get progressively worse until someday in 5, 10, 25. or 50 years we have either used up all oil, destroyed ourselves, or have turned things around and cleaned up our act.

It still isn't too late to reverse our actions, with increased awareness of the problem through presentations in classes and other educational opportunities, more people can join the effort to clean up our act. Also direct actions such as reusing, reducing, recycling, and picking up plastic bags can help in a major way. One final solution is switching to multi-use bags such as cloth or paper, but many people say that numbers indicate that there is a greater use of energy consumed to make a reusable bag than a plastic bag. For instance one would have to use a cloth

bag 145 times in order to equal the energy required to produce one plastic bag (Reuseit). While this is true, reusable bags are still better because they don't need to use dirty energy or an oil bioproduct to be made.

While writing this essay approximately 210 million bags were produced, contributing 189 million plastic bags to the already out of hand problem. It takes 700 years for a plastic bag to decompose, so one can either die hoping things will start to change for the better or start taking action immediately. By volunteering in cleanups, everyday recycling, and choosing to use reusable bags instead of single-use plastic bags an individual can help slow and eventually eliminate this plastic bag problem.

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