

The Problem with Plastic Bags

(Most of the following content is offered with appreciation from the website of Green Sangha www.greensangha.org.)

Single-use bags use up natural resources and energy. Plastic bags are made from polyethylene. Polyethylene comes from petroleum, a nonrenewable resource. Only a few plastic carry-out bags use recycled content; most of those contain only around 5% recycled material.

Plastic bags are indestructible. Plastic bags take between 20 and 1000 years to break down in the environment. Even when they do break down they are not really gone. Plastic bags do not bio-degrade. They simply break apart into ever smaller pieces, eventually forming "plastic dust." No matter how large or small they are, plastic bits are not digestible by any creature on land, in the air, or under the sea. We are literally choking the planet with products which cannot re-enter the life cycle.

Plastic bags and packaging are killing marine life. More than 1 million birds, more than 100,000 whales, seals and turtles, and countless fish worldwide are killed by plastic rubbish every year. These deaths occur through entanglement, suffocation, and starvation by ingestion. A Minke whale found on a beach in Normandy in April of 2002 had approximately 2 pounds of plastic bags and packaging in its digestive tract.

Plastic is getting into the food chain. Even the finest particles of plastic represent a threat to creatures at the lowest level of the food chain in the marine environment, the filter-feeders. Then, toxins in filter-feeders are passed up the food chain to fish and other marine animals, which humans then consume.

Plastic is over-running our planet. Estimates run as high as one million pieces of plastic per square kilometer, floating in specific areas of the Pacific Ocean. In these areas, plastics outnumber plankton, the base of the marine food web.

But plastic bags are so convenient!

It depends on how far we are looking. A plastic bag may be convenient for a minute or two when we carry something out of the store, but for the rest of the life of the bag (which is forever) it is not just inconvenient, it is ugly, toxic, and life-threatening. There are alternatives to plastic bags.

What can we do?

1. We can learn more about the impact of plastic packaging.
2. We can begin today to limit, and then eventually stop, our consumption of plastic bags.
3. We can use alternative carry-out bags for shopping and other carrying uses: bags that are made from all-natural fibers, such as jute, hemp, woven cotton, and canvas.