



Plastic Bags & Take-out Containers

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Plastic Bags & Take-out Containers: Should They Be Banned?

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At the mall, people push shopping carts to their cars. Everything they buy goes into a bag. Bags help us carry things neatly and easily from place to place.

Take-out food requires another type of container to keep the food safe. Food goes into a plastic foam box or bowl made of polystyrene. That container then goes into a plastic bag. Once the food is eaten, both the container and the bag are thrown away.

Have you thought about what happens when you “throw something away”? Usually, you put it into a garbage can or recycling bin, and then it is sent to a dump or a recycling plant. However, most plastic bags and containers end up as litter. They make a mess of our streets, parks, rivers, and oceans. They aren’t just messy, though. Plastic bags and containers are also dangerous and expensive to clean up.

All around the world, plastic pollution is a serious problem. But plastic bags and containers are so handy and cheap that they are used almost everywhere. There are different ideas about what we should do about plastic bags and containers. Should they be banned? Should we pay for them? Many cities and countries are trying different solutions to the plastic problem. After you read this book, write and talk about your ideas with your classmates. What do you think is the best solution to the plastic problem?

What Science Says About: Pollution from Plastic Bags

Plastic bags make people's lives easier. Paper bags and cardboard boxes can rip easily and can't carry things like water or take-out food. Also, plastic bags save trees.

Every five seconds, 60,000 plastic bags are used in the United States. Between 500 billion and one trillion bags are used every year throughout the world. That's a lot of bags. Even though plastic bags were designed to be used for a short time, they last for a very long time—from 10 to 1,000 years!

In addition, many bags end up in places where they cause problems, like rivers and oceans. Plastic bags in the water can look like jellyfish. Sea turtles and other marine animals that eat jellyfish may accidentally eat the plastic bags and die. Birds and animals can also get tangled in plastic bags and become unable to fly or swim.

Another type of plastic, polystyrene, is used for take-out containers. It is inexpensive and lightweight. It also insulates the food, keeping it warm or cold. Take-out food in cardboard boxes can spill and make a mess. Polystyrene, though, is strong enough to keep food from spilling.

Some people say we should just recycle plastic bags and polystyrene. But plastic breaks down very

slowly. This means that there would be mountains of plastic bags and polystyrene that could last for 10 to 1,000 years.

Another problem with plastic is that it is made from oil. There is a limited amount of oil, and oil is a valuable resource. One solution is to make stronger and longer-lasting reusable plastic bags. They won't blow away and become litter. And because they are thicker, people can use the bags many times. Instead of using two plastic bags, people can use one reusable bag.

People need to consider safety, energy use, and many other things before they decide to ban plastics. However, it is clear that adding one trillion plastic bags and thousands of polystyrene containers to our environment every year is a big problem!



Ban, Tax, or Educate

For many years, people used plastic bags or polystyrene boxes instead of paper bags and cardboard boxes. They did not know about the problems that these plastics can cause.

To solve their plastic problems, cities and countries around the world want their citizens to use fewer plastic bags and less polystyrene. Here are some ways they are helping their citizens use less plastic.

Some towns in the United States ban plastic bags altogether. Stores are not allowed to pack things in plastic bags, but they may allow shoppers to put vegetables, fruit, and meat into clear plastic bags. Stores can be fined if they give out plastic bags. In addition, some stores pay shoppers five or 10 cents for every reusable bag they bring to the store.

Some countries, such as Ireland, charge a tax of about 30 cents on plastic bags. They hope that people will not want to pay money for plastic bags, and that they will bring bags from home instead. Since the tax was put in place, plastic bag use has gone down by 90 percent.

Other countries educate their citizens about why they should use fewer plastic bags. They use ads with pictures of plastic bag litter to convince people to bring their own bags to stores. They also try to get more people to recycle plastic bags or to throw them away safely. They hope that people will understand the problem and do the right thing.

Around the world, people are tracking how their solutions are working. If plastic bag use and litter don't go down, they will look for better solutions.



What People Say About: Banning Plastic Bags and Take-out Containers

Letter to the Union City Herald

I was unhappy to read that our city is considering banning or charging a fee on plastic bags and polystyrene take-out containers. These are hard times, and these fees will add up.

Some people call plastic bags “single use” bags, but it’s not like that in my house. We use the bags to line the garbage cans and carry wet swimsuits. We take bags back to the store to be used a second or even a third time. We use some to pick up after our dog, too.

We get a lot of use out of plastic bags. When the bags are dirty or ripped, we use them for garbage. If we didn’t get free plastic bags at the store, we’d have to buy them, and just as many would end up in the trash.

I don’t think we should ban plastic bags until something better is invented. Will reusable bags really save the world? Have people forgotten that you need resources to make reusable bags and that making the bags cause pollution too? One study done in London found that making cloth reusable bags causes so much pollution that people would need to use a bag 171

times to equal the amount of pollution caused by making one plastic bag. The study also showed that the cloth bags are only used about 51 times! That doesn’t seem like a “green” idea. Let’s think seriously about how much money people save by using free plastic bags and take-out containers.

Yours truly,
Patti Stevens

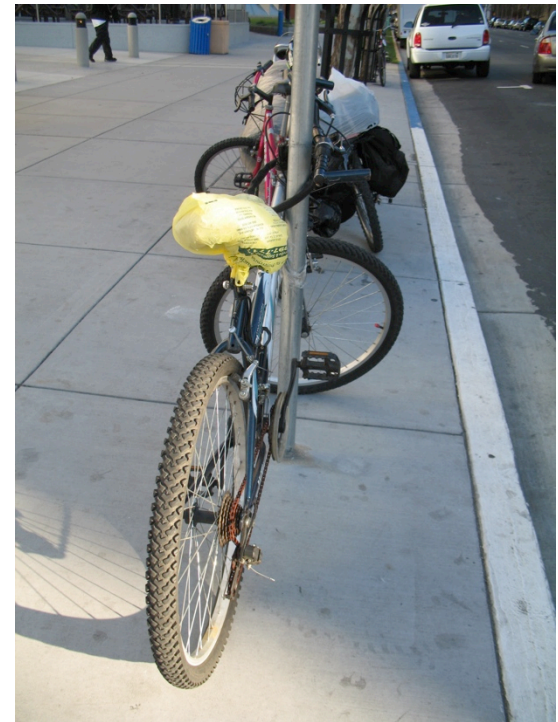


Photo: Plastic bag seat protection. San Jose, CA. March, 2007. Taken by Richard Masoner. Some rights reserved <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en>

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A Letter to an Assemblywoman

Dear Assemblywoman Brownley,

I am in fifth grade at Carter School, and I'm writing to say I hope you don't give up on the plastic bag ban. Sometimes people just need time to understand things. They need to learn that it is important to get plastic out of the environment. After all, plastic kills turtles and other wildlife.

Why do people complain about bringing bags to the store? They aren't expensive, and they last a long time. My family just puts the bags back into the car after we use them. That way, they're always ready to be reused.

Our class did some habitat restoration in the wetland near our school. It was pretty disgusting. We found garbage everywhere! Plastic bags were stuck in the bushes, and some were even sticking out of the mud. Take-out food containers were all over, too. This is the animals' home! How would people feel if someone did that to their home?

At first, I didn't understand why we couldn't just throw the bags into the garbage or recycle them. But then I learned that a lot of the bags that end up in the wetland *were* thrown away in the garbage. They just

blew away before they could be buried in the landfill. I once had a bag blow away from my picnic table, and I couldn't catch it. I felt really bad.

Many people wonder why more plastic bags and polystyrene isn't recycled. Recycling plastic isn't as easy or as profitable as recycling glass or paper. Also, melting or burning plastic can release toxic gases into the air. Many companies do not have the money to recycle plastics, and I wouldn't want to live near a place with toxic gases.

If there is this much plastic bag garbage lying around when I'm ten, how bad will it be when I'm twenty? That's why I say you need to keep trying to pass a law to ban plastic bags.

Thank you for trying,
Robin Silva



What People in Other Countries Say About: Pollution from Plastic Bags

In October last year, Thomas Davis was one of 60 children that took a field trip to the River Thames in London, England, to clean up part of the shore. Their field trip was part of Animal Action Week in England.

The River Thames is the longest river in England. In London, it rises and falls with the tides. At low tide, the bottom of the river has a colorful carpet of plastic bags. More than 250,000 bags have been removed from the river in the past 10 years. Thomas and his classmates wanted to clean up the litter that harms the animals that live in the water.

The students were given rubber boots and gloves to protect them from the mud. They got pretty muddy anyway, but the shore looked better by the end of the morning. In addition, they knew that the sea birds and animals would be safer.

“I’m going to be a lot more careful with my plastic (bags),” said Thomas. “I can see now what happens if you leave one on the ground instead of in the (garbage can). It ends up in the river.”

One of the parents who went along to help said she was delighted to see that kids were willing to get

muddy for a good cause. She said it gave her hope for the future to see that children will work to protect the environment.

Later, the class debated the problem. The students knew that people who cared about wildlife wanted to ban the bags. But they also learned that shoppers might want a choice about what kind of bag they can use. And they understood that workers in plastic-bag factories don’t want to lose their jobs. Clearly, the students had a lot to think about!



What do you think?

What do you do with plastic bags you get from the store?

What ideas do you have for helping people reuse or recycle plastic bags or polystyrene?

Would you volunteer to clean up litter in parks and on beaches? Why or why not?

What ideas do you have for how to keep the land and oceans free from plastic bags and take-out container litter?

How do you think litter could be prevented?

What do you think is the best way to reduce the number of single-use plastic bags?

Should they be banned?	Should they be taxed?
Should people be educated about how to use them properly?	What other ideas do you have?