



Marine Litter

By Adrian Stone, US sailor- originally published on his Facebook site in 2008

I was listening to the radio today when a random statistic fluttered through the headphones, through my ears and into my consciousness, and I felt more than compelled to share it with you all. The bomb the radio station dropped that caught my usually fleeting attention was, in no uncertain terms, astounding. A quick bit of research has validated this remarkable claim, which is nothing less than utterly devastating: It is estimated that the human race goes through an estimated 500 billion to 1 trillion plastic bags per year.

One trillion! I don't even know how many zeros that is! If the bags were tied together, they would wrap from the earth to the moon and back again FIVE TIMES. That's 240,000mi x 5. And that's just per year. The EPA estimates that less than 5% of plastic bags are recycled. That leaves 95% of, lets say 750 billion plastic bags, or 712,500,000,000 bags inundating our landfills, or more often the case, floating their vile way around the streets, parks, forests, and oceans of our world.

As a sailor, all too often have I sailed into the shallows of an isolated anchorage, into the lee of some rocky island, or navigated the shoals of some exciting new coast only to find myself sharing water with the invasive and far too common bag fish. The last few Atlantic and Pacific crossings proved to me that not even in the middle of the widest oceans am I free from the bag's pasty, suffocating presence. Not only does the cursed bag steal from the romance of it all, it wreaks havoc upon the very ocean I love. Listed as one of the top ten types of debris worldwide, plastic bags are a serious threat to the earth we enjoy.

As if laughing at our mortality, plastic bags can take somewhere between 300 to 1000 years to photo-degrade. And even in their smallest particles, they become a magnet for chemicals such as DDE, a main component of DDT, making for a gnarly gut bomb to any creature (including humans!) that ingests the foul plastic remains. Sadly, bags account for some 100,000 marine animal deaths per year.

As it stands, about one million bags are used worldwide per minute. In the United States, an American uses 83 bags per year, and as a whole it adds up to for over 100 billion plastic bags per year. China accounted for 3 billion bags per year, and even THEY have enacted legislation banning plastic bags outright as of June 1st, 2008. Some scientist at

the EPA figured that if every one of New York's 8 million citizens used one less plastic bag per year, it would reduce about 5 million pounds of rubbish! Our landfills are full of plastic bags! And it's not only the US; as of 2007 it is estimated that the average UK consumer uses 167 plastic bags per year, and only 1 bag in 200 is recycled.

I can't even get my head around that! So if a New Yorker uses only 82 bags per year and it accounts to 5 million pounds saved, imagine if EVERYONE used one less per year? I'm no mathematician, but you can figure that the weight and bulk saved would just be ridiculous. What if we didn't use ANY plastic bags in a year? What then?

More and more countries such as Ireland, Uganda, Kenya, parts of India, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and, as mentioned above, China, and more are taxing each bag used, or better yet banning them outright. America is still lagging behind. I think a lot of it has to do with a lack of consciousness of the problem. Which is why I'm writing this: I knew that plastic was bad for the environment, but I had no idea of the sheer volume of it all. We're under siege by our own convenience! How long 'til we're swimming in a sea of plastic?

So next time you're at the market, or getting take-away, opt not for a plastic bag. Bring a reusable. Go for a paper bag (though they require more energy to produce, they're recycled on a far greater basis AND they biodegrade). So often are plastic bags given out for a small purchase that would just as readily fit in a pocket or a purse!

I implore you all to send this on- forward it, talk about it, raise consciousness, whatever. And more to the point, I implore you all to take some kind of action. Everything boils down to a multitude of small personal choices that affect us all in a grand scale. As consumers, I implore you to make the personal choice to abstain from using that useless plastic bag.

Thanks for reading this, and with luck we will share a clean future together. A future that shall not be awash in plastic.

Adrian Thibeault-Stone
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