

The Upside of Plastic Carry Out Bags

By Anthony van Leeuwen, 12/12/2012

The plastic carry out bag has been given a bad rap because of misinformation. With the internet the propagation of bad information or myths are almost impossible to stop. For example, the plastic carry out bag is widely believed to have caused the death of 100,000 marine mammals and a million seabirds as a result of ingesting plastic bags. However, the allegation is untrue and was based on a Canadian study that stated the deaths were a result from discarded fishing nets and fishing tackle and not plastic bags or plastic debris as reported in an article published in The Times of London on March 8, 2008 entitled "Series of blunders turned the plastic bag into global villain".

Proponents of banning the plastic carry out bag have further demonized it by calling it a "single-use" plastic bag as part of a propaganda campaign. The real "single-use" bag is the plastic trash bag. Once the trash bag is used for its primary purpose to hold trash, it is never reused for any other purpose. The plastic carry out bag, on the other hand, once used for its primary purpose to carry purchases home, has a large number of secondary uses. Hence, this bag is really a multi-use bag. The reusable bag is also a multi-use bag but more durable. To call the plastic carry out bag a "single-use bag" is intellectually dishonest.

One of the main reasons often cited to ban plastic carry out bags is harm to wildlife. Pictures of a bird carcasses show that birds swallow plastic objects including bottle caps, plastic cigarette lighters, shards of plastic, and other plastic debris. There are even videos showing sea gulls eating plastic bags that were tainted with fast food. It should be obvious to everyone that harm to wildlife extends beyond plastic bags and includes all sorts of plastic debris that floats to the ocean. Therefore, banning a single product such as plastic bags will not prevent harm to wildlife as a result of plastic debris. A comprehensive solution is required.

80% of plastic debris in the ocean comes from land based sources and is conveyed through storm drains into rivers and into the ocean. Regional Water Quality Control Boards under the federal Clean Water Act are required to reduce pollution and trash in rivers. Cities adjacent to rivers are required to install trash excluders or capture screens in storm drains to prevent plastic bags, other plastic debris, and litter from flowing into the river and the ocean. The City of Ventura is currently installing trash excluders in storm drains that empty into the Ventura River. Another source of litter in the river bottom comes from homeless encampments.

Plastic bags as litter are mostly seen in commercial and public areas or along major roadways and freeways where trucks travel. The California Department of Transportation states that litter on the highway results from trash and debris blowing from improperly covered or uncovered truckloads from pickup trucks to trash and recycling collection vehicles. Developing a program to cover loads in partnership with hauling stakeholders can help to reduce roadside litter.

Families and individuals can do more to ensure that clean plastic carry out bags are not discarded in the curbside recycling container or the trash can, but recycled at the bin at your local grocery store. If you do have to discard an empty carry out bag, simply tie it in a knot to prevent it from becoming wind-blown litter.

Common sense demands a comprehensive solution to deal with all litter not just by banning a single product.