Plastic Bags and the Environment

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Consumers use millions of plastic bags every day at grocery stores and convenience marts. Plastic bags were invented for convenience to carry customers’ food or a new soft pillow to their cars. Unfortunately, after serving their purpose, plastic bags are discarded. Some will find their way to the landfill; some will find their way into the oceans, or even into your neighbor’s tree. Plastic bags not only contaminate the environment, they contaminate our oceans, and they are killers.

The History

The invention of plastic bags was a great convenience for shoppers; by providing the consumer with plastic bags, the store would make the customers happy and make additional sales. The plastic bag became a reality in 1974 when stores started using plastic instead of paper (FFBD Environmental Issues, 2015). When stores switched to plastic instead of paper, they could not foresee the consequences of the environmental disaster that was going to be unleashed.

Inventor Francis Wolle invented the paper bag in 1852 (Ament, 2006). Paper bags were used for many years prior to when plastics became available. The paper bag industry has since shifted gears to other products, which provided more profit. Previously stores would offer customers a choice between plastic or paper. Stores now will charge customers for using plastic or paper, and give a discount for using the customers’ own bags.

Recycling

The recycling industry is not doing enough to keep up with the amount of plastics that are thrown away. In 2013, only 9 percent of plastics were recycled and only 1 percent is recycled globally each year (All about: Recycling plastics, 2008). Both types of bags are made from natural resources—paper bags from trees and plastic bags from oil. Both require excessive amounts of resources to make and a lengthy process to recycle.

The recycling centers are burning plastics as a recycling alternative; some of the problems with burning plastic bags are the large amounts of carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions produced. Oil is the main substance used to create plastic bags, and when burned at large incinerator plants, a large amount of carbon dioxide is produced. These emissions need to be controlled, which costs lots of money.

The Argument

The benefits of plastic are the low costs and its feasibility to recycle. The new standards imposed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on burning plastics have made plastics easier to recycle than paper. Paper requires more labor and more resources to recycle, logging, large machinery, and large production factories for processing (Graff & Decker, 2015).

Large amounts of dangerous chemicals, such as sodium hydroxide and hydrogen peroxide, are used to bleach paper (Graff & Decker, 2015). These chemicals require large amounts of clean water to convert the recycled paper to a usable product; however, some of the water is not recycled and escapes back into the clean water supply. When plastic is recycled, it is melted at recycling centers that use incinerators and can be re-used then re-melted several times before becoming unusable (Graff & Decker, 2015).

Recycling plastic requires fewer resources than paper. Plastics are easier to recycle and provide more options as an end result than paper. Recycled plastics are more durable; they can be found in your automobile, in your refrigerator, and in the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) space station. According the International Journal of Engineering, polyethylene bags are not the main killer of sea animals; long drag fishing nets kill the most sea animals (Rujnic-Sokele & Baric, 2014).

Plastic Bags and Landfills

The current amount of plastic bags is unknown; it is known that close to 33.6 million tons are not recycled (Plastic Oceans, 2010). The ability to recycle plastic bags is not available to many people in many areas. In some areas, the recycling of plastic bags is not an option, only plastic bottles are recycled by trash pickup companies. With the size of landfills growing larger every year, the need for plastic recycling is more of a necessity than just being trendy.

In 1990, the first recycling program started to help combat the excessive amount of landfill growth that was noticed. Every year the United States produces 30 million tons of plastic waste (Headifen D. R., 2012). Dr. Ross Headifen states that, “Plastic is not a natural product, so nature has no way of breaking it down.” Plastic takes millions of years to break down by ultraviolet (UV) light, which is mainly from the sun, where paper only takes a few thousand years (Headifen D. R., 2012).

Plastic Bags and Oceans

Plastics are floating in every ocean. In Dr. Sylvia Earle’s “Plastic Oceans” video interview, she summed up the plastics problem with these words, “Without the ocean, life on Earth could not exist.” The plastic bag and other plastics are creating a problem with the food chain. The floating plastic is broken down by sunlight; the UV rays from the sun create a micro solution that small plankton eat, then larger fish and whales consume the plankton. The plankton is making its way back up the food chain (Headifen D. R., 2012).

The consumption of plastic does not result in a quick and painless demise; the animals that consume the plastic have a long drawn-out death. The plastic prevents them from eating and they starve to death, or they can die by becoming entangled in plastic nets or bags.

The problem with plastic bags is a real problem and is not going away anytime soon. It is not just a problem in developed countries; it is a problem all over the globe. We need better solutions for recycling if we continue to use plastic bags, or we must ban them if a solution cannot be found.

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