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Plastic Bag Myths

Plastic bags are being demonized across the world these days, but most of the statistics given to justify bag bans and taxes are either misleading or just plain wrong. Below are some of the more popular myths about plastic bags, as well as some interesting facts.

Oil Consumption

MYTH: According to many websites and environmental groups, plastic bag manufacturing uses a large percentage of the crude oil that is consumed in the US. Some suggest that eliminating plastic bags would reduce our dependence on oil.

TRUTH: Plastic bags, and all plastics for that matter, are made from byproducts created by refining petroleum products. The raw material for most plastic bags made in the US is actually natural gas. Less than 3% of all oil ends up being converted into plastic - ALL plastic - from car bumpers, to computer parts, to bags and packaging. The VAST majority of oil is refined into fuel.

The equivalent of approximately 12 million barrels of oil goes into the annual US supply of plastic bags. This sounds like a huge number until you compare it to the 20 million barrels used *every day* in the US, mostly as fuel for transportation and industry.

Bag manufacturing is a fraction of 1% of US oil consumption. The average US per capita bag use is about 500 bags a year – the oil equivalent of about half a gallon of gas.

Banning or taxing plastic bags will do nothing to curb oil consumption.

Single Use

MYTH: Most proposed bag bans and taxes use statistics based on an assumption that plastic bags are only used once.

TRUTH: Studies have shown that 80-90% of the population reuse plastic grocery bags at least once. As trash bin liners, for picking up after pets, as lunch sacks, holding wet laundry, etc. Plastic bags are also very easy to recycle, and most grocery stores provide bag recycling bins.

Ireland's Bag Tax

MYTH: Ireland's 2002 tax on plastic grocery bags reduced plastic bag use by 90%.

TRUTH: This is partially true, but doesn't tell the whole story. Use of plastic *grocery checkout bags* declined, but sales of packaged plastic bags went up by about 400%, resulting in a net gain in plastic bags going to landfills. This shows that most people were reusing their plastic grocery bags for tasks where plastic bags are the best solution - trash can liners, picking up after the dog, wet garbage, etc.

San Francisco Bag Ban

MYTH: In 2008, San Francisco banned plastic bags, which resulted in a huge drop in bag use, and an increase in reusable bags.

TRUTH: Yes, since plastic bags were banned, stores stopped using them. But there was not a huge shift towards reusable bags. Instead, there was a huge increase in paper bag consumption. According to all studies, paper bags are responsible for many times the pollution and oil consumption than plastic bags. Paper is heavier, and not as durable, as plastic and requires far more resources to create, and creates much more air and water

Plastic Bag Myths

Many popular beliefs about the environmental impact of plastic bags are exaggerated or just plain wrong.

[Learn the facts...](#)

Biodegradable Bags

American Plastic is now producing bags that are 100% biodegradable and recyclable!

[More info...](#)

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

The best solutions for reducing waste involve reducing use, reusing when possible, and recycling.

[Here's some ideas...](#)

pollution. In addition to this, the San Fran Ban also practically eliminated bag recycling programs in the city, and after one year, plastic bag litter (the main reason for the ban) had actually increased.

Recycling

MYTH: Recycling plastic bags is extremely costly and difficult.

TRUTH: Recycling programs are growing all the time, and plastic recycling is actually a very simple, cost effective and energy efficient process. The main products currently made from recycled grocery bags is composite lumber, and new bags.

Marine Wildlife Tangled in Bags

MYTH: "Over 100 thousand marine animals die from becoming tangled in discarded plastic bags each year."

TRUTH: The report that this myth was based on (a Canadian study from 1987) didn't mention plastic bags at all. In 2002 the Australian Government commissioned a study on plastic bags, and the authors misquoted the 1987 study. What the original study found was that between 1981 and 1984 over 100 thousand marine mammals and birds were killed by being caught in discarded fishing nets and lines.

Litter

MYTH: Plastic bags are a major source of litter, and banning or taxing bags will reduce litter.

TRUTH: Plastic bags make up less than one percent of all litter. Cigarette butts, fast food packaging, and food wrappers are much larger contributors. Banning one item that becomes litter does nothing to change the mindset of those that discard trash improperly. Many of the bags that end up as litter blow off of garbage trucks or out of landfills. Landfill operators and garbage haulers should be held accountable for items that escape containment.

Since plastic bags are responsible for less than 1% of all litter, banning or taxing them will have no impact. The solution to litter is public education, recycling programs, and proper disposal.

Landfills

MYTH: Landfills are overflowing with plastic bags.

TRUTH: Plastic bags are easily recycled, but even if they do end up in a landfill, they take up a small fraction of one percent of landfill space. The average person uses about 500 plastic grocery bags per year, which by weight is about the same as a phone book or two. By comparison, the average person generates nearly one ton (2000 pounds) of garbage each year.

The major contributor to landfills is paper, wood and construction debris. Banning or taxing plastic bags would mean that more paper bags would get used, resulting in more waste going to the landfill.

Paper Bags are Better

MYTH: Many people believe that paper bags are a better environmental choice than plastic.

TRUTH: Paper bags, even recycled ones, require many times more energy to produce than plastic. Paper production and recycling also produces far more air and water pollution than plastic. And because paper bags weigh nearly 10 times that of plastic bags, they require 10 times the fuel to transport.

Paper bags can also be easily contaminated with oils, grease, and food waste that can contaminate entire batches of recycling. Plastic bags can be cleaned prior to recycling to eliminate contaminants.

Reusable Bags

MYTH: The prevailing environmental opinion is that heavyweight canvas, cotton, and polypropylene reusable bags are the best choice to replace plastic bags.

TRUTH: While these reusable bags are great for some uses, their environmental impact hasn't been properly studied. Most are made in China, where health and pollution standards are somewhat lax, and then shipped halfway across the globe to get to you.

Reusable bags also can't be used for the myriad of things that disposable bags are used for. If disposable bags aren't available at the checkout stand, people will purchase packaged bags for secondary uses such as trash can liners.

Bans and Taxes

MYTH: Taxing grocery bags or banning plastic bags will reduce greenhouse gasses and save the planet.

TRUTH: Since bags are a minimal contributor to all the problems associated with them (oil use, litter, landfill volume, etc.), bans and taxes simply won't do anything for the environment. And because the alternatives all require more fuel to create, recycle, and transport, eliminating plastic bags actually increases greenhouse gasses.

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