

We've all been there before. You're standing in the grocery check-out line, and you have just been asked a simple question:

# **Paper or Plastic??**

By Betsy Rickards, CZM

The grocer expects a quick answer, but you pause to consider your options. Your mind wanders into the perplexities of environmental outcomes.... *Paper, biodegradable and easy to recycle, but an awful waste of precious trees. And paper bags consume so much energy to manufacture. But, at least they don't persist in the environment and hurt marine life. But paper bag production can pollute the air and water with chemicals, hmmm.... Plastic, re-usable, but then again—really only once.* But stores are now taking them back. But they are a major source of trash blowing around our towns and floating in our seas. They do require less energy to produce, but then again they are made out of non-renewable petroleum resources. But... Excuse me...paper or plastic? Oh! Your mind snaps back to reality and to the impatient people waiting in line behind you. Just give me paper, please.

*If you knew the indigestion I suffered from the plastic bag I tried to eat last year! Oy!*



But, was your hasty decision the right one? Maybe, if you are picking between the lesser of two evils and won't reuse or recycle a plastic bag—but maybe not, if you consider your other option: canvas or cloth. More and more people are discovering the convenience, the environmental benefits, and the avoidance of the ultimate conundrum at the check-out counter when they bring their own re-usable bags. In fact, most stores are now supplying them to encourage this environmentally friendly (and cost-effective) alternative.

The issues with plastic and paper are probably not a mystery to you. Those thick and hardy paper bags you get at the grocery store consume trees (as much as 14 million to produce a year's supply). To boot, the amount of recycled content that can be used for these grocery bags is minimal because they require a higher quality paper pulp to bear the weight of groceries. They require more energy than plastic bags to not only produce, but also to recycle. And because paper bags use more raw materials and energy, they come with a higher cost. But that doesn't let plastic bags off the hook. On the contrary, plastic production and processing require the use of toxic chemicals, and the longevity of plastics (as much as 1,000 years for a high-density polyethylene plastic bag) leads to serious threats to our marine ecosystem and wildlife. In one year, Americans go through millions of barrels of oil to make billions of plastic bags. And of those billions of plastic bags, untold millions end up in our oceans, creating hazards for boaters and marine life, not to mention ruining the aesthetic of the coastline. Plastic bags can damage boats when they block water intakes or get caught in propellers, and can be lethal to marine mammals, sea birds, and sea turtles through entanglement or ingestion—in fact, a study of 50 green, loggerhead, and leatherback turtles showed plastic bags to be the main debris item found within their stomachs.

Paper bags may actually be the preferred option for communities on the coast because overall it is better for the marine and coastal ecosystems. In fact, some coastal cities, such as San Francisco, and some markets nation-wide, such as Whole Foods, have even taken steps to ban single-use plastic bags. Other stores charge for plastic bags. Picking the lesser of two evils is no longer necessary given that there is another choice with far fewer negative consequences. By bringing re-usable bags, you are personally preventing thousands of paper and plastic bags from entering the "system." So next time answer the grocer's question with no hesitation and no environmental guilt: cloth, please.



Photo: Arden Miller

*Plastic bags can live for up to 1,000 years. And that's a mighty long time.*