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Bags a tiny fraction of sea trash

By Danny Westneat
Seattle Times staff columnist

I figured if anyone would jump for joy at Seattle's crusade against plastic bags, it would be the flotsam guy.

Maybe you've heard of Curt Ebbesmeyer. He's considered one of the world's leading oceanic garbologists (though, as he jokes, how many can there be?). From his basement in Ravenna, he uses beachcomber reports to track the comings and goings of floating sea trash. Like dozens of rat-poison canisters that washed onto Washington shores this spring. Or computer monitors, which "always float screen up, eyes peering out of the waves."

An oceanographer, he also named the Earth's most shameful man-made feature, the "great Eastern garbage patch." That's a Texas-sized soup of plastic junk, swirling in floating clouds across the Pacific between us and Hawaii.

It's such a huge and indestructible soiling of the sea that Ebbesmeyer feels bad he dubbed it only a "patch."

"It's trash that will never go away, stretching across the water farther than you can see," Ebbesmeyer says. "It would absolutely horrify you to see it."

So when I asked him what he thought of Seattle's plan to crack down on disposable grocery bags, I was surprised when he sort of shrugged.

"It's OK, but plastic bags are not the real problem," he said. "It's one little battle out of a million. Go look at what the ocean carries in on a given day. You'll see what I mean."

Last month, Ebbesmeyer held a "Dash for Trash" in Ocean Shores. In two hours, 50 people collected an astonishing 2,000 pounds of junk from the beach. Almost all of it was plastic — from fishing floats to shotgun shells to dolls from Japan. Yet very little of it was the plastic bags targeted by Seattle.

I did my own garbology "dig" at low tide in Seattle's Myrtle Edwards Park. In half an hour poking along 300 yards of shoreline, I found a demoralizing 173 pieces of trash.

Take out the wood (paintbrush), the metal (beer cans, foil wrappers) and the miscellaneous (earplugs, nicotine patches, ropes, a corncob, an orange traffic cone), and I was left with 137 pieces of plastic.

Top item, by far: Plastic bottles. Followed by plastic bottle caps. Then plastic lids and plastic cups. Plus a slew of plastic food packaging.

Number of plastic grocery or drugstore bags? One.

The plan is to levy a 20-cent-per-bag fee on both plastic and paper bags, in hopes we'll all stop using them. That's fine, Ebbesmeyer told me. But it's such a tiny slice of the global plastic problem it's scarcely worth commenting on.

"If the mayor really wants to get on the stick, he should go after plastic bottles. Or plastic wrapping of food products. Or how about a tax or a ban on petroleum-based plastic, period?"

Now some of you have written to say the mayor, for proposing even this mild intrusion into our lives, is an eco-fascist who'll pry your bags only from your cold, dead fingers.

But take it from the flotsam guy. He has seen a seabird with 700 bits of plastic in its stomach. He has sampled seawater in which plastic particles outnumber plankton six to one. He has gazed into the planet's plasticizing heart of darkness.

From out there, this bag flap is a drop in the ocean.

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