

In Defense of Plastic Bags

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By **TIM SHESTEK** Thu, Apr 01, 2010

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Researchers and activists are taking to the sea to raise awareness about marine litter, often focusing on readily visible abandoned fishing nets and plastic litter that floats. Everyone agrees that plastics don't belong in our oceans. The primary question all of us—beachgoers, boaters, businesses, public officials—should ask ourselves is: how do we keep all types of litter out of our oceans in the first place?

Scientists, international organizations and activists have concluded that efforts to outlaw a single product like plastic bags, as recommended in a recent opinion article ("Time for

a Ban on Plastic Bags," Bullhorn, March 17) falls short of providing the kind of comprehensive thinking that leads to real solutions. Most agree that holistic approaches including recycling, coupled with tough litter abatement laws, well-run municipal waste management systems and behavioral changes, can help keep plastic bags (and other materials) out of our waste stream, off our beaches and out of our oceans.

Complex environmental problems can't be solved by bumper sticker slogans and reflexive reactions like bans. Case in point: When San Francisco banned the use of plastic grocery bags, most shoppers simply switched to paper bags. Little did they know that plastic bags require 70 percent less energy to manufacture, produce 50 percent less greenhouse gas emissions and create five times less waste than bulky paper bags. The result? San Francisco unwittingly increased energy use, greenhouse gases and waste.

As for litter, the city's own audit conducted after the ban had been in effect found that litter did not decrease.

Instead of supporting a ban, many Californians are taking a simpler approach: reduce, reuse, recycle. How? Nearly every major retailer sells inexpensive reusable bags, so consumers can easily pick up a reusable bag on any shopping trip, and then they can bring their own. Ninety percent of consumers already reuse plastic grocery bags at home to pack their kids' lunches, to line their trash cans and to clean up after their dogs.

And with new recycling programs spanning the state, Californians can return any leftover plastic bags to grocery stores and retailers for recycling. A recent state law requires large grocers and retailers to offer recycling bins for plastic shopping bags—plus dry-cleaning bags, newspaper bags and plastic wraps from bread, paper towels, cases of soda and more.

Plastic bag makers are partnering with retailers and recyclers to give these products another life as durable backyard decking, home building products, city park benches and new plastic bags. A rapidly growing infrastructure has helped the recycling of plastic bags and wraps grow 28 percent nationwide since 2005 and double the recycling rate according to EPA, and growth is expected to continue as a result of new state laws like California's.

Advocates of plastic bag bans and taxes are ignoring the effect their policies would have on the recycling of other plastic wraps like newspaper bags, dry cleaning bags and many other wraps that can be recycled with plastic bags. Their proposals would make it harder to recycle because grocery stores will drop collection programs. And even curbside programs—like Santa Cruz's—that tell people to put their bags and wraps in other bags for recycling will find it more difficult. The best move would be to encourage more Santa Cruz residents to do what many already are doing: recycling their bags and other wraps.

Efforts to prevent marine litter and its effects require a global, comprehensive response. By working together to get serious about recycling and accountability for litter, we can reverse this preventable scourge on our oceans.

Tim Shestek is a senior director with the American Chemistry Council, a trade association representing plastic and chemical makers.

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Tim Goncharoff

Fri, Apr 02, 2010 - 2:57 pm

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