

[Top 7 Myths About Plastic Bags](#)

By [Heidi Scott](#)

You could be forgiven for thinking that the humble plastic bag is the devil incarnate, single-handedly responsible for the sorry state of the planet. But just how much truth is there behind the claims of those lobbying to have plastic bags banned?

Myth 1: The manufacture of plastic bags uses vast amounts of crude oil.

In fact, plastic bags - along with all kinds of plastic products - are made from the by-products that arise from refining petroleum. Less than 3% of oil ends up converted into plastic - and that's all plastic, not just carrier bags. Rather than oil, the raw material for most plastic bags is actually natural gas. Of course, the majority of oil is refined into fuel. Some 12 million barrels of oil are used in the USA each year to produce plastic bags, compared to 10 million barrels a day used to fuel cars.

Myth 2: A ban or tax on plastic carrier bags will help the environment.

Nope. The Irish Republic introduced a bag tax in 2002 and the country's experience shows that, although the number of bags that stores handed out fell by 90%, this positive effect was outweighed by several unexpected factors. Studies show that 80-90% of the population reuse plastic bags from their grocery shopping in many ways - as bin liners, as pet pooper-scoopers, to hold wet laundry and so on. In Ireland, as the use of plastic supermarket bags declined, so sales of packaged plastic bags - for all these additional reuse reasons - rocketed by some 400%. Of course, these packaged plastic bags are designed to be stronger and therefore contain much more plastic than checkout bags. The Irish bag tax actually resulted in a net gain in the number of plastic bags going into landfill. Incidentally, another result of the bag tax was a spike in shoplifting in Ireland, as people took advantage of using their own bags within the store to pinch goods from the shelves.

Myth 3: Recycling plastic bags is difficult and extremely costly.

Wrong again. Plastic bags are actually very easy to recycle. The difficulty comes from the fact that not every area has access to recycling facilities. However, recycling programmes are growing all the time - for example, many on-line grocery delivery vans will now collect any spare plastic bags from the previous delivery for recycling. Plastic recycling is a simple, cost-effective and energy-efficient process.

Myth 4: There is no market for recycled plastic.

The main product made from recycled checkout bags currently is composite lumber, which can be used for items such as outdoor decking and railing. There is a convincing and growing market for this type of material. Cleaner plastic bags and industrial film can also be recycled into raw material for new bags.

Myth 5: Plastic bags are a major source of litter.

Although plastic bags are seen amongst litter, statistically they make up less than one percent of all litter. The real culprits are cigarette ends and snack or fast food packaging. Since plastic bags

are responsible for such a small proportion of litter, banning or taxing them will not have any significant impact. Rather, the litter problem has to be solved by changing the minds of those responsible through education and recycling incentives.

Myth 6: Landfill sites are overflowing with plastic bags.

Plastic bags should not end up in landfill because they are easily recycled, but even if they do end up there, they take up just 0.3 percent of landfill space. Sadly, paper - which has been the subject of public education on recycling for some years now - accounts for more than 40% of a landfill's contents, on average. The typical person uses some 500 plastic grocery bags each year - equivalent in weight to a phone book or two - whereas the total rubbish he or she creates annually is almost 2000 pounds (907 kg). Along with paper, the major contributors to landfills are wood and building debris. It is generally thought that plastic bags take a millennium to decompose in landfills. Some experts argue that virtually nothing - paper, food or even compostable or bio-degradable products - will decompose in today's landfills, because they are designed to be as stable and dry as possible. Research by William Rathje, for example, has shown that newspapers from the 1960s excavated from landfill can be intact and readable!

Myth 7: Plastic bags are a poor environmental choice.

Plastic bags are actually highly energy-efficient to produce and recycle. What's more, because they are light and compact, they are very fuel-efficient to transport. Today's plastic bags use 70 per cent less plastic than 20 years ago and yet are as strong and durable. A plastic bag weighs about seven grammes, but can carry up to 20 kg, which is more than 2,500 times its own weight. Unlike those made from other materials, plastic bags can also be easily cleaned prior to recycling to eliminate contaminants. Don't forget that many of today's reusable bags - such as those made from jute or cotton - are made in China or India, where environmental controls are not very stringent, and then transported around the globe to get to their markets, which is not very environmentally friendly at all. Plastic bags can also be used to produce energy. Across Europe, it is estimated that 30 million tonnes of oil each year is saved by burning waste plastic in clean-energy-from-waste plants. One incinerated plastic carrier bag will keep a 60-Watt light bulb illuminated for an hour!