

Ripple Effect #50

WATER AND PLASTIC DON'T MIX

The state of California is enacting a law to stop the use of plastic grocery bags. A crazy idea, we might think—those Californians are always doing outlandish things. We live in an age of plastic, after all. Since the invention of celluloid in 1869 until today, plastic has taken over everything in our lives from children's toys to the communication industry. Who hasn't seen a little yellow plastic bathtub toy--or hear Sesame Street's Ernie sing about his "rubber" duckie? Who doesn't use telephones, personal computing, cell phones, automobiles? Plastic has become ubiquitous in our lives—we hardly notice any more when something is made of plastic.

To meet all our current plastic needs, we produced 200 million tons of plastic on our earth in one year. In these days of oil shortages, making this amount of plastic takes at least 400 million tones of oil and gas each year. Given our usage of petrochemical plastics, these figures can only rise.

What we don't always think about right off is where does all this plastic GO? Well, a small amount of plastic—approximately 5%--is recycled. Many forms of plastic do not yet have methods for recycling. Much plastic, of course, reaches our city and country or province landfills—most of us have witnessed plastic bags clinging to fences around these landfills on windy days, almost like flags to remind us of the prevalence of plastic in the piles of human discards.

Plastic ends up in our streams, lakes and oceans as well—lots of it. We have all witnessed litter along our local stream banks and beaches, litter that typically gets caught up in runoff and floods and spends its lifetime—500 years or more if it's plastic—in our natural water systems of streams, lakes, oceans. What we hear about less often are railroad-sized cartoons full plastic items falling off ships as they are trying to reach our shores.* One organization has estimated that an area of the North Pacific has 46,000 pieces of visible plastic per square mile of ocean. Another way of putting it, one would find in this area 6 pounds of plastic for each 1 pound of zooplankton.

The difference is that zooplankton provides vital nutrition--plastic can't be eaten or even fully dissolved by any animal or element we know of on our earth. At what point will our oceans give up, as it were, trying to hold the weight of our plastic waste?

Replacing plastic grocery bags with reusable totes or boxes may not seem like much of a step. But it is a concrete practice that most of us can take with little bother, whether or not it is mandated by law. A step that can remind us of the extra work we impose on our waters every day.

*For an account of twelve containers of plastic floating toys that spilled into the ocean from a ship, and for the source of several of this article's statistics, see the January 2007 Harper's article, "Moby-Duck: Or, the Synthetic Wilderness of Childhood."

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.

