

### Ripple Effect #93

## **Is It Time to Move Beyond Plastic Bags?**

You go into a store and buy a couple of items, and you are asked, “paper or plastic?” Many people reply, “plastic.” If you did, you’ve just consumed another of those 500 billion to a trillion plastic bags made, used and thrown away each year. Fewer than 1% of these plastic bags are recycled – it costs more to recycle plastic bags than to produce new ones.

We are often reminded that most of these plastic bags go into our dumps by the stray bags caught on fences or vegetation by waste facilities.

Yes, plastic bags do gradually break down into smaller and smaller pieces. But in the process of degrading, they only become more toxic, contaminating waterways and soils. When the particles become small enough, they can enter the food chain, a food chain that ends with us.

We usually don’t think of plastic bags making their way into our waterways. But a good share of them do. One study showed that oceangoing vessels alone dumped eight million pounds of plastic bags in one year. “Ocean fill,” they call it. Stray bags also find overland ways to the sea via drains and sewage pipes.

Bags have been found as far north as the waters of the Arctic Circle and as far south as the Falkland Islands. They account for at least 1% of all debris washed up on the US coast.

Too often, sea birds or other sea wildlife become terminally entangled in plastic bags. Many die after ingesting the plastic, thinking it is food. Whales, dolphins, seals and turtles are among the over 200 species of aquatic life that have been identified as eating plastic bags.

All of this is not to mention that plastic bags are made from polyethylene, a thermoplastic made from oil that requires millions of barrels each year to feed our habit.

A number of countries have banned plastic bags. Others, including Canada, are moving towards bans, or have reduced considerably the use of plastic bags by taxing them (Ireland) or requiring customers to pay for them (China). Individual cities in the US have already banned or are considering banning routine use of plastic bags.

But why wait? If you alone began using reusable totes, you could save 300 bags a year. If just one of five of us in the US would use reusable totes, we would save 1,330,560,000,000 plastic bags over our lifetime!

Isn't it about time?

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](http://www.redriverbasincommission.org).

