



# Leading the Way Toward a Clean Ocean

Communities Around the World Take  
Action Against Single-Use Plastic Bags



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Action Against Single-Use Plastic Bags



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July 2011

# Acknowledgments

Environment California Research & Policy Center would like to thank Kirsten James at Heal the Bay and Leslie Tamminen at Seventh Generation Advisors for their review and insightful comments on drafts of this report. Additional thanks to Cameron Harris for research assistance and to Tony Dutzik and Rob Kerth at Frontier Group for editorial assistance.

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders or those who provided review. Any factual errors are strictly the responsibility of the authors.

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# Executive Summary

**O**ur oceans are polluted with millions of tons of plastic trash. In the Pacific Ocean, plastic debris churns in a soup called the Great Pacific Garbage Patch – an area twice the size of Texas where plastic bits outweigh plankton. Plastic pollution persists for hundreds of years, and can kill turtles, seabirds and other marine animals.

Throw-away plastic bags are a significant part of the problem. **To reduce ocean pollution and protect the environment, more than 80 national and local governments across the planet have taken official action** to ban throw-away plastic bags or to establish fees or taxes on such bags.

State, county, and city governments in California should follow their lead and ban the use of plastic grocery bags.

## **Plastic bags contribute to the pollution of California's ocean and beaches.**

- Californians use approximately 16 billion plastic bags per year – more than 400 annually per person.
- Less than 5 percent of plastic bags are recycled. Instead, they end up sitting in landfills, littering streets, clogging streams, fouling beaches, or floating out to sea.
- Plastic trash threatens ocean ecosystems. Sea turtles and other marine animals often mistake plastic bags for jellyfish and eat them, causing injury or death. In parts of the Pacific Ocean, including the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, plastic outweighs plankton by up to six times.

- The city of San Francisco estimated that the taxpayer cost to subsidize the recycling, collection, and disposal of plastic and paper bags amounts to as much as 17 cents per bag. Applied to California as a whole, that adds up to more than \$1 billion per year.

**More than 80 national and local governments around the world have taken action to protect the ocean by reducing the use of plastic bags.**

- At least 20 nations and 47 local governments have passed bans on distributing specific kinds of throw-away plastic bags, including the nations of Italy, Kenya, Mongolia, Macedonia, and Bangladesh; the states of Maharashtra, India and Buenos Aires, Argentina; and the cities of Karachi, Pakistan and Telluride, Colorado.
- Approximately 26 nations and local communities have established fee programs to reduce plastic bag use and/or increase the use of reusable alternatives, including Botswana, China, Hong Kong, Wales, Ireland, Israel, Canada's Northwest Territories, Toronto, Mexico City, and Washington, D.C.

**Bans and meaningful fee programs effectively reduce plastic bag pollution.**

- Bans and fee programs quickly reduce plastic bag distribution. Ireland, which in 2002 established a fee roughly equivalent to 28 U.S. cents per bag, saw plastic bag use drop by 90 percent within the first year. After Washington, D.C., implemented a much smaller 5 cent tax on plastic bags, the number of

bags distributed by food retailers fell from 22.5 million per month to 3.3 million per month. And the year after banning plastic bags at pharmacies and supermarkets in 2007, San Francisco businesses distributed 127 million fewer plastic bags, and cut overall bag waste reaching the city landfill by up to 10 percent.

**Eleven city and county governments in California have taken successful action to reduce plastic bag pollution.**

- Eleven California cities and counties have bans on plastic bags in effect, including Long Beach, Santa Monica, San Jose, San Francisco, and unincorporated Marin and unincorporated Los Angeles counties. Five of these communities, including Marin County and San Jose, have also authorized mandatory charges on paper bags to encourage citizens to use reusable bags.
- Two additional communities, Oakland and Manhattan Beach, passed bans that were later struck down after legal challenges by plastic bag manufacturers.

**Much more progress can be made to reduce plastic pollution in the ocean and transform our throw-away culture.**

- Education and recycling cannot keep pace with the generation of plastic bag pollution. Despite a 2006 law requiring retailers to place bag recycling bins in front of their stores, less than 5 percent of bags are recycled.
- To make a real impact, all California cities and counties should restrict the use of plastic bags, and advocate for similar action at the state level.

# Introduction

Our oceans are an irreplaceable treasure. The Pacific Ocean, for example, is central to California's culture and our livelihood. Off the rocky coast of Big Sur, sea otters frolic and sea turtles feed on jellyfish. The largest mammals on earth, blue whales, migrate up and down our shores. Pods of thousands of dolphins play in the wakes of ships. Seabirds congregate on beaches and harbors, belting out their familiar cries. And beneath the waves, the seafloor is covered with corals as old as redwoods.

Our oceans are also an incredibly valuable part of our economy. The Pacific Ocean contributes an estimated \$43 billion and more than 400,000 jobs to California's economy, particularly in tourism and recreation.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, our oceans are also in trouble. Destructive overfishing, global

warming, habitat damage, and pollution are putting important marine ecosystems at risk. Many critical wildlife populations are in serious decline.

The problems facing our oceans are varied and complex, from our overdependence on fossil fuels to our careless use of natural resources. However, many of these problems can be traced back toward an unreasonable expectation that our oceans will be endlessly productive even as we use them as a trash receptacle.

To protect and preserve California's treasured ocean ecosystems for the long haul, we need to stop using ocean waters as a landfill. The most important way to accomplish this is to generate less trash.

Plastic bags – the throw-away kind you can pick up at many grocery stores –



*Our oceans are an irreplaceable treasure and an important part of our economy. To protect ocean ecosystems for the long haul, we need to stop using ocean waters as a landfill and generate less trash.*

are a good place to start. These bags help us move groceries for a few minutes, but they pollute our environment for hundreds of years. They represent a wasteful use of limited fossil fuel resources. Switching to reusable bags can cut down on the amount of plastic trash ending up in the ocean, and begin to raise public consciousness about the need to make our civilization more sustainable.

Banning plastic bags is an idea whose time has come. As this report shows, nations from Tanzania to Italy, and communities from Buenos Aires to Santa Monica, have taken action to reduce plastic bag pollution. While the list of policies covered in this report is not necessarily exhaustive, it does show the wide scope of action across the planet to protect our oceans, reduce litter, and use our natural resources more wisely.

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“By joining these global communities in banning plastic bags, California has an opportunity to build on its reputation for environmental leadership.”

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By joining these global communities in banning plastic bags, California has an opportunity to build on its reputation for environmental leadership. Each new county, city or town that takes action to reduce plastic bag pollution builds momentum towards a cleaner ocean for current and future generations.



# Plastic Bags Pollute California's Beaches and Ocean

Millions of tons of plastic trash pollute our oceans, everywhere from the poles to the equator.<sup>2</sup> According to the United Nations Environment Programme, every square mile of ocean contains 46,000 pieces of floating plastic, on average.<sup>3</sup>

For example, one thousand miles off the California coast, more than 100 million tons of plastic garbage has concentrated in an area known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.<sup>4</sup> Churned by ocean currents, this plastic trash spans an area twice the size of Texas.<sup>5</sup> Within this area, plastic outweighs plankton by up to six times.<sup>6</sup>

Too much of this trash comes from items that we use for a short time and then discard. Throw-away plastic bags are a prime – and visible – example. Plastic bags are convenient, but they are also durable and buoyant. For a few minutes

of carrying groceries, the bags have the potential to contaminate the ocean environment for hundreds of years.

Every year, Californians throw away approximately 16 billion plastic bags.<sup>7</sup> That adds up to more than 400 bags per person per year.<sup>8</sup> In 2007, Los Angeles County estimated that county residents used about 600 bags per year.<sup>9</sup> Less than 5 percent of these plastic bags end up recycled, despite the efforts of retailers to collect used bags in storefront bins, which are required by state law.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the bags end up sitting in landfills, littering streets, clogging streams, fouling beaches, or floating out to sea. According to beach cleanup volunteers working with the Ocean Conservancy, plastic bags were the sixth-most common item found on beaches worldwide over 25 years of clean up events, accounting for 5 percent of all trash items.<sup>11</sup>

photo: Flickr user pantagrapher



*Throw-away plastic bags are a visible example of the trash contaminating our beaches and ocean. Although used for only a short while, a plastic bag can last for hundreds of years in the environment.*

## Plastic Trash Threatens Ocean Ecosystems

Plastic trash harms the health of ocean ecosystems. More than 260 marine species have been found with plastic in their stomachs or tangled around their bodies – interfering with feeding, movement and reproduction, and causing injury and death.<sup>12</sup>

In June 2011, researchers at UC San Diego’s Scripps Institute of Oceanography published a study finding that nearly one in ten small fish collected in the middle of the Pacific Ocean had plastic in their bodies. The researchers estimated that fish are eating as much as 24,000 tons of plastic each year, and that the plastic enters the food chain through small fish.<sup>13</sup>

Plastic pollution kills turtles, seabirds and other marine animals. Sea turtles are

a particularly visible example of a marine animal threatened by plastic pollution. Sea turtles often mistake plastic bags for jellyfish and eat them.<sup>14</sup> The bags can get trapped in the turtle’s digestive system, causing great harm. All seven species of sea turtle are in urgent danger of extinction.<sup>15</sup>

In March, 2011, a group of sea turtle scientists gathered in Hawaii to discuss the “ocean emergency” of plastic pollution.<sup>16</sup> In a press release, Dr. Wallace Nichols of the California Academy of Sciences wrote:<sup>17</sup>

“Last year I counted 76 plastic bags in the ocean in just one minute while standing in the bow of our sea turtle research boat at sea in Indonesia. Sea turtles have spent the past 100 million years roaming seas free of plastic pollution, and are now sadly the poster animal for impacts of our throw-away society on endangered species.”

One study by Australian scientists, including Dr. Kathryn Townsend, found that nearly 30 percent of turtle mortality in the eastern Moreton Bay region was due to plastic debris consumption. Half of the plastic in turtle stomachs was thin plastic, like the kind

used to make plastic bags.<sup>18</sup>

To protect the sea turtle and the broader ocean ecosystem, many communities around the world have taken action to reduce or eliminate plastic bag pollution.

*photo: Ron Prendergast, Melbourne Zoo*



*Sea turtles often mistake plastic bags for jellyfish and eat them, suffering harm.*

### **Plastic Pollution Costs Our Economy, Too**

Plastic pollution costs developing and industrialized nations up to \$1.3 billion annually, primarily by threatening fishing, shipping and tourism industries.<sup>19</sup> In the United States, governments spend at least \$11.5 billion annually on litter collection, disposal and enforcement. Businesses bear almost 80 percent of this burden.<sup>20</sup> The city of San Francisco estimated that the cost to taxpayers of subsidizing the recycling, collection, and disposal of plastic and paper bags amounts to as much as 17 cents per bag.<sup>21</sup> Applied across California as a whole, that likely adds up to more than 1 billion dollars per year.

Retailers spend hundreds of millions of dollars annually to provide single-use bags to customers. Supermarkets spend up to \$1,500 to \$6,000 a month to provide single-use bags to their customers at the check-out.<sup>22</sup> Stores typically pay 2 to 5 cents per plastic bag; these costs are embedded in food prices which are then passed onto consumers.<sup>23</sup>

# Communities Across the World Have Taken Action to Reduce Plastic Bag Pollution

**M**ore than 80 national and local governments across the world have taken official action to protect the ocean by reducing the use of plastic bags. In their place, retailers are selling reusable bags, or bags made from compostable material.

Nations from Kenya to Mongolia, and local governments from Maharashtra, India to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, have taken action to ban throw-away plastic bags. Dozens more, from Hong Kong to Ireland, have established fee programs to reduce plastic bag use or support more sustainable alternatives. Other nations and communities have established taxes on businesses that distribute plastic bags.

## Bans on Plastic Bags

At least 20 nations and 46 local governments have implemented bans on distributing specific kinds of throw-away plastic bags.

Governments have had a variety of reasons to implement bag bans. Some communities enacted bag bans specifically to reduce ocean pollution – a rationale particularly common in communities whose economies depend upon whale watching and other forms of ocean tourism. Others chose to enact the policy to reduce litter. For example, the state of Maharashtra in India, where Bombay is located, banned plastic bags to prevent them from clogging storm drains and contributing to floods.<sup>24</sup>

Policies that ban the distribution of plastic bags are the most effective at reducing plastic bag pollution. For example, the year after banning plastic bags at pharmacies and supermarkets in 2007, San Francisco businesses distributed 127 million fewer plastic bags, and cut overall bag waste reaching the city landfill by up to 10 percent.<sup>25</sup> And four months after Huntingdon, Canada, banned plastic bags, the owner of a grocery store reported that 82 percent of his customers brought their own bags, while the remainder chose paper.<sup>26</sup>

Governments at the national, state and local level have created various types of plastic bag bans.

## Nations

At least 20 nations have passed bans to reduce bag pollution, including:<sup>27</sup>

Bangladesh	(2002)
Bhutan	(2005)
Botswana	(2007) <sup>28</sup>
China	(2008)
Eritrea	(2005)
Ethiopia	(2008)
France	(2010)
Kenya	(2008)
Italy	(2007)
India	(2002)
Macedonia	(2011) <sup>29</sup>
Mongolia	(2009) <sup>30</sup>
Papua New Guinea	(2009) <sup>31</sup>
Rwanda	(2005)
Somaliland	(2005)
South Africa	(2003)
Taiwan	(2003)
Tanzania	(2006)
Uganda	(2007)
United Arab Emirates	(2011)

## Local Governments Abroad

Additionally, more than 20 local governments outside of the United States have passed plastic bag bans, including:<sup>32</sup>

Dahka, Bangladesh	(2002)
South Australia	(2008)
Northern Territory, Australia	(2011)
Loddon Shire, Victoria, Australia	(2005)
Corsica, France	(1999)
Paris, France	(2007)
Rio de Janiero, Brazil	(2009)
Buenos Aires, Argentina	(2008)
Leaf Rapids, Manitoba, Canada	(2007)
Eriksdale, Manitoba, Canada	(2008) <sup>33</sup>
Coldwell, Manitoba, Canada	(2008) <sup>34</sup>
Huntingdon, Quebec, Canada	(2008)
Hurghada, Red Sea Province, Egypt	(2009) <sup>35</sup>
Delhi, India	(2009)
Maharashtra, India	(2005) <sup>36</sup>
Himachal Pradesh, India	(2009) <sup>37</sup>
Chandigarh, India	(2008) <sup>38</sup>
Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan	(2006) <sup>39</sup>
Zanzibar, Tanzania	(2006)
Llandysilio, Wales	(2007)

*photo: Istockphoto.com, user McIninch*



*Policies that ban the distribution of plastic bags or establish fees or taxes on such bags are effective at reducing plastic bag pollution, and encouraging the use of reusable bags.*



photo: Environment California staff



Eleven city and county governments in California have plastic bag bans in effect.

## Local Governments in the United States

Well over a dozen American communities outside of California have acted against plastic bags, including:<sup>40</sup>

American Samoa	(2011)
Maui County, Hawaii	(2008)
Kauai County, Hawaii	(2009)
At least 30 coastal communities in Alaska, including Bethel	(2009) <sup>41</sup>
Telluride, Colorado	(2011) <sup>42</sup>
Westport, Connecticut	(2008) <sup>43</sup>
Unincorporated Marshall County, Iowa	(2008) <sup>44</sup>
Outer Banks, North Carolina	(2009) <sup>45</sup>
Southampton Village, New York	(2011) <sup>46</sup>
Suffolk County, New York	(1998) <sup>47</sup>
Brownsville, Texas	(2011)
South Padre Island, Texas	(2011) <sup>48</sup>
Edmonds, Washington	(2009) <sup>49</sup>

## Local Governments in California

Within California, 13 city and county governments have taken action to reduce plastic bag pollution, including the citizens of Fairfax, in Marin County, who enacted a bag ban by popular vote through a ballot initiative in 2008.<sup>50</sup> Legal challenges from plastic bag manufacturers ended up invalidating two of these laws, in Oakland and Manhattan Beach.<sup>51</sup> Eleven areas currently have bag ban policies in effect, including:<sup>52</sup>

Unincorporated Marin County	(2011)
Fairfax (Marin County)	(2008)
Unincorporated L.A. County	(2010)
Calabasas (L.A. County)	(2011)
Malibu (L.A. County)	(2008)
Long Beach (L.A. County)	(2011)
Santa Monica (L.A. County)	(2011)
San Francisco	(2007)
Unincorporated Santa Clara County	(2011)
Palo Alto (Santa Clara County)	(2009)
San Jose (Santa Clara County)	(2010)

These areas represent fully 10 percent of the population of California.<sup>53</sup>

## Fee Programs and Taxes

Approximately 25 nations and local communities have established fee programs to reduce plastic bag use or encourage reusable alternatives.

Fee programs and taxes can have multiple purposes. First, by establishing a price on disposable bags, governments can send a price signal to citizens to motivate different behaviors. For example, in 2002 the Republic of Ireland established a 15 Euro cent tax on plastic bags (roughly equivalent to about 28 U.S. cents per bag today), applied to consumers at the point

of sale. In the first year of this policy, consumers used 90 percent fewer plastic bags. The tax grew relatively less effective over time, so the nation increased the tax in 2007. Overall, plastic bags have gone from 5 percent to less than 0.25 percent of the waste stream.<sup>54</sup>

Washington, D.C. provides another example. After the district implemented a much smaller 5 cent tax on plastic bags, the number of bags distributed by food retailers fell from 22.5 million per month to 3.3 million per month.<sup>55</sup> That is a decrease of more than 85 percent. This action translated into an observed decrease in plastic pollution in area rivers and streams. According to the Alice Ferguson Foundation, since implementation of the bag fee, river cleanup efforts have turned up 66 percent fewer plastic bags.<sup>56</sup>

Fee policies can also reimburse shop owners for any added expense of policy compliance. For example, stores in unincorporated Los Angeles County must charge customers 10 cents for every paper bag provided. The store retains the revenue and can use it to cover the cost of providing paper bags or the cost of educating customers about reusable bags. These types of features can help plastic bag reduction policies win the support of retail businesses.

Fee programs and taxes can also provide funding for government programs. For example, Ireland uses the money from its bag tax for recycling programs, enforcement of solid waste laws, and other environmental priorities.<sup>57</sup>

Some countries have both a ban on certain types of plastic bags, and fees on others. For example, China has banned disposable bags that fail to meet the durability standards necessary to be considered reusable. China then requires retailers to charge customers a fee to ob-

tain one of the more durable plastic bags, encouraging reuse.<sup>58</sup>

Governments that have created fee programs or taxes applied to throw-away bags include:<sup>59</sup>

## Nations

Belgium	(2007)
Botswana	(2007) <sup>60</sup>
Bulgaria	(2011)
China	(2008) <sup>61</sup>
Denmark	(1994) <sup>62</sup>
Hong Kong	(2009) <sup>63</sup>
Germany	(earlier than 2005) <sup>64</sup>
Ireland	(2002)
Israel	(2008)
The Netherlands	(2008) <sup>65</sup>
South Africa	(2003) <sup>66</sup>
Wales	(2011)

## Local Governments Abroad

Northwest Territories, Canada	(2010)
Toronto, Ontario, Canada	(2009)
Amqui, Quebec, Canada	(2008) <sup>67</sup>
Mexico City, Mexico	(2009)
Andalucia, Spain	(2011) <sup>68</sup>

## Local Governments in the United States

Washington, D.C.	(2009)
Montgomery County, Maryland	(2011)

## Local Governments in California

In California, state law prohibits local governments from enacting fees applying to plastic bags (although outright bans are permissible).<sup>69</sup> However, several communities have established fees on alternative bags to direct consumer behavior.

For example, after San Francisco's plastic bag ban, critics noted that many people simply shifted to paper – another type of disposable bag with its own set of environmental problems.<sup>70</sup> In response, several California communities have established fees that apply to paper bags as a companion policy to a ban on plastic bags. These policies serve as a signal to encourage consumers to furnish and use their own reusable bags. These communities include:

Unincorporated L.A. County	(2010)
Marin County	(2011)
Calabasas (L.A. County)	(2011)
Long Beach (L.A. County)	(2011)
Santa Monica (L.A. County)	(2011)
San Jose (Santa Clara County)	(2010)

Telluride, Colorado enacted a similar fee policy to complement its plastic bag ban in 2011.<sup>71</sup>



*By taking action to reduce the use of plastic bags, communities across California are making a real difference in the problem of ocean pollution.*



# Policy Recommendations

Nothing we use for a few minutes should end up polluting our oceans for hundreds of years. Items meant only for a single use provide dubious convenience, and a great deal of hidden cost. When we throw away something like a plastic bag, “away” may actually mean our beaches, our treasured ocean, or the belly of a whale.

To protect our oceans and conserve precious natural resources, our culture needs to shift away from its “throw away” mentality.

Californians are leaders when it comes to protecting the environment. By taking action to reduce the use of plastic bags, communities across California are mak-

ing a real difference in the problem of ocean pollution.

But there is much more to be done. Education and recycling efforts simply cannot keep pace with the generation of plastic bag pollution.

Every city and county government in California should enact its own policy to limit the use of throw-away plastic bags. Not only can these individual policies have a meaningful impact on their own, they will build momentum for other state and local governments to take similar action.

Ultimately, California’s actions can lead to a cleaner ocean for current and future generations.

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57. See note 54.

58. Mary O'Loughlin, Fulbright Research Fellow, B.Y.O.B. (*Bring Your Own Bag*): *A Comprehensive Assessment of China's Plastic Bag Policy*, 17 February 2011, available at [digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=student\\_pubs](http://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=student_pubs)

59. These policies are not uniform. Some fees and taxes apply to plastic bags. Others apply to paper bags as an added price signal complementing a ban on plastic bags. Some apply to consumers at the point of sale. Others apply to retailers upstream in the supply chain. The purpose of this report is to note the existence of these policies in a variety of locations across the world, and not to compare the relative strengths and weaknesses of these policies. Unless otherwise noted, the sources for all policies and adoption dates are: State of Florida, Department of Environmental Protection, *The Retail Bags Report: List of Retail Bag Policies*, updated 28 January 2011, available at [www.dep.state.fl.us/waste/retailbags/pages/mapsandlists.htm](http://www.dep.state.fl.us/waste/retailbags/pages/mapsandlists.htm); and Jennie R. Romer, Esq., PlasticBagLaws.org, *Legislation*, downloaded from [plasticbaglaws.org/legislation/](http://plasticbaglaws.org/legislation/) on 7 June 2011.

60. See note 28.

61. See note 58.

62. Denmark also taxes wasteful packaging and waste delivered to landfills to encourage more sustainable use of resources by product manufacturers and retailers.

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71. See note 42.