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## Stepping Away from our Disposable Culture

by [Max Bayuk](#) | on June 9th, 2014 | 2 comments

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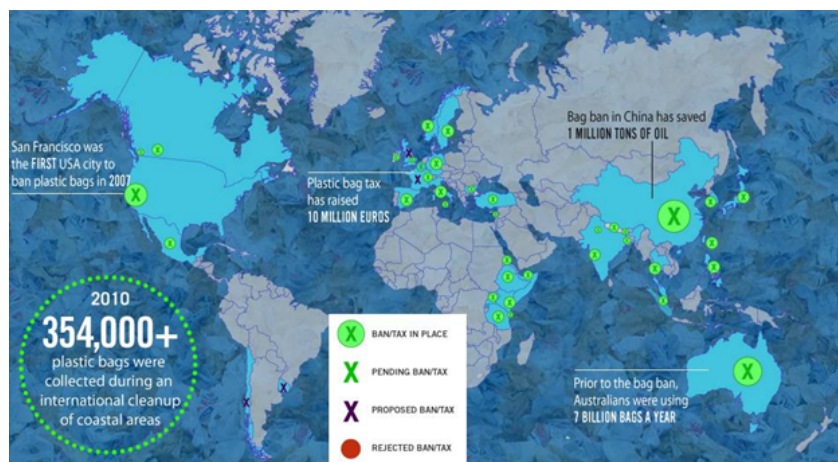
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*"There is a malign force loose in the universe that is the social equivalent of cancer, and it's plastic. It infiltrates everything. It's metastasis. It gets into every single pore of productive life."*

-Norman Mailer, Harvard Magazine, 1983

With a global increase in awareness over the past few decades about the health of our fragile planet, people have become more concerned about the harm posed by plastic products on our environment. As a result, consumers, governments, nonprofits, and even businesses have begun taking action against the use of disposable and single-use plastic products. Reducing the use of plastic bags has been an effective strategy, and placing a tax on their use, or banning them altogether, has become commonplace around the globe.





## Our Plastic Paradox

But plastics didn't always carry the negative rap that is now frequently (and with good reason) associated with them. In fact, in the 1950s, plastic products were introduced to American consumers and marketed as a 'miracle solution' to make life easier. And indeed they did. Plastic bags, disposable cutlery, and a long-list of other disposable plastic products hit the market, and their convenience made them extremely popular.



Once considered a breakthrough in consumer packaging, it has taken over 50 years to show the world that this 'miracle solution' is not such a miracle, after all.

We now know that this convenience comes at a high price, and that plastics can harm our environment in many ways. Scientists estimate that Americans alone throw away over 100 billion plastic bags each year. Once a plastic bag makes it to the landfill, a single bag can take over 1000 years to biodegrade — a long time for something that's meant to be used for just a matter of minutes or hours.

But oftentimes, plastic bags don't even make it to the landfill. Due to these bags being so lightweight, they are often picked up in the wind and carried long distances, ending up in storm drains and waterways. From there, the bags travel to the oceans, where they are incredibly harmful to marine wildlife and ecosystems.



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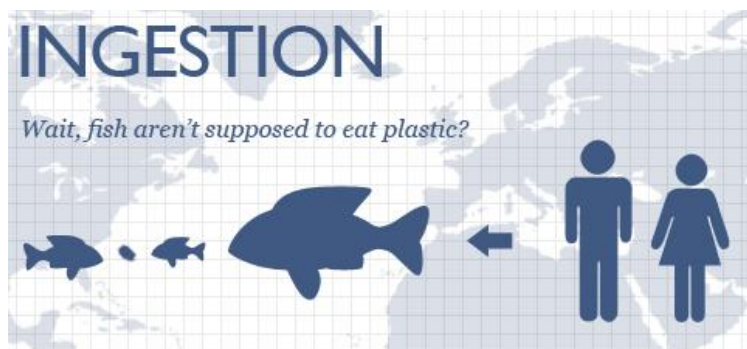
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44% of all seabird species, 22% of Cetaceans, all sea turtle species, and a growing list of fish species have been documented with plastic in or around their bodies (source: 5gyres).

Ocean debris worldwide kills at least 1 million sea birds and 100,000 mammals each year, and 267 different species have been scientifically documented to be adversely affected by plastic marine debris. With the reduction of biodiversity posing one of the Earth's greatest environmental challenges of the 21st century, the overall health of marine life is crucial to the survival and sustainability of our ocean's delicately interconnected ecosystems.



Marine life and plastics don't mix (source: 5gyres).

But these sea-creatures aren't the only ones in danger – humans may be too. Many scientists are concerned about the human health impacts of harmful chemicals contained in plastics working their way up the food chain to our bodies. The marine science community is now increasingly researching how toxic chemicals like PCBs and DDT are absorbed into the tissues of animals that eat plastic, where they may become increasingly concentrated over time and consequently enter our bodies when we eat seafood.

## Reversing the Rising Plastic Tide

Fortunately, countless efforts are underway to reduce our society's reliance on single use plastics. Legislation across the globe, from China, to Kenya, to Washington DC, has begun to take effect, specifically targeting plastic bags. Across the United States, hundreds of cities and counties now have ordinances that ban their use. In addition, individuals and nonprofits are doing their part to raise awareness and create change. These efforts span from political lobbying, to education, to beach and ocean clean-ups.

Musician Jack Johnson is at the helm of several initiatives to support solutions to plastic pollution. The [Johnson Ohana Charitable Foundation](#) (JOCF) supports environmental, art, and music education worldwide, with a special focus on funding

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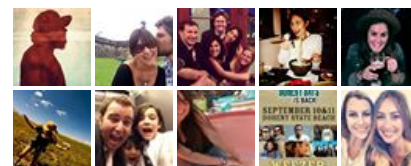
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Yesterday at 10:19am

Kimchi, kombucha, kefir, pickling, wine and beer...and a bunch of other awesome. The [Santa Barbara Fermentation Festival](#) demo and workshop schedule is on the streets!



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nonprofits working to reduce disposable plastics. Jack's [All At Once](#) social action network encourages people to take personal action and showcases plastic-free projects, specifically ones which address the behavior side of plastic consumption, as opposed to policy and legislation.

"Policy efforts and legislation to ban plastic bags are incredibly important and we're happy to see momentum grow on that front," said Jessica Scheeter, JOCF's Executive Director. "But we're more focused on behavior change. If we can get people to become educated about the issue and learn more about the consequences of using single-use plastics and about alternatives – that's where the change will start."



Heidi Taylor (left) of the Tangaroa Blue Foundation, a JOCF nonprofit grantee in Australia, with Jack Johnson (center) clearing Kahuku Beach of plastics and more.

The tagline for *All At Once*, "An individual action, multiplied by millions, creates global change," reflects the kind of work they support, which targets the source of plastic pollution: individuals' consumption.

JOCF and *All At Once* work with a variety of innovative nonprofits on this front, such as the hands-on environmental education programs of [Explore Ecology](#), the solution-oriented work of [Plastic Pollution Coalition](#), and the combination of collaborative research and education of [Algalita Marine Research Institute](#), to name a few. Other partner nonprofits, like [5 Gyres](#), and their partnership with [Klean Kanteen](#) through [1% for the Planet](#), work to expose the public to the extent of the plastic debris in the oceans through powerful images, and offer sustainable solutions like Klean Kanteen's reusable water bottles and food canisters.

Many of these programs target youth, since they're the ones whose behavior is most easily changed and whose future is most directly impacted.

"We love to see young people take the approach where first they learn about the issue, maybe through a beach clean-up or a school program," said Scheeter. "Once the magnitude of the issue has set in, they come up with their own solutions."

"There are so many better alternatives in terms of product design and a shift away from one-time disposable packaging toward reusables," said Johnson, who is President of JOCF in addition to international music superstar. "It's important to involve young people in creating solutions and educating their own families."

## Ban the Bag

There is progress being made as well on the more political side to reduce plastic bag use and associated pollution. The number of towns, cities, and counties passing bag-ban legislation across California and the rest of the United States continues to climb, and the results are promising.

The City of Santa Barbara has recently joined a group of over 108 cities and counties in California covered by plastic bag legislation. This trend began in 2007 with San Francisco's pioneering bag ban, which catalyzed a chain-reaction of subsequent policies across the state. That same year, the movement toward a ban in Santa Barbara began to gain traction.

Spearheaded by Santa Barbara's [Community Environmental Council \(CEC\)](#), in partnership with Santa Barbara [Channelkeeper](#) and the City of Santa Barbara's Environmental Services, the 'Where's Your Bag?' campaign distributed over 10,000 reusable bags around town at a variety of community events in an effort to reduce plastic use. The CEC's [Kathi King](#) played a key role in initiating that effort, but insisted that while education on the matter was important, it would take legislation to make real, lasting change.



Kathi King of the CEC using her reusable 'Bag Free SB' bag at the local supermarket.

"It was a good start, but we didn't really move the needle on the 47 Million Bags that were being used every year in Santa Barbara," King commented. "We knew that source reduction via policy change would be essential."

Several years later, after repeatedly lobbying City Council, gaining support from other organizations, battling opponents of the ban, and riding the momentum of the other new policies throughout the state, the bag ban was passed.

"The success didn't come without its roadblocks, though," commented King. "One of the largest ones was the lobby from the American Chemistry Council. They had a plastic bag lobby and a Plastic Bag Coalition. They came to meetings and talked about job loss...they threatened lawsuits," added King.

Yet, in the end, the effort to pass the ban prevailed, and in October 2013, Santa Barbara officially adopted the 'Single-Use Carryout Bag Ordinance,' which prohibited the use plastic bags by all non-restaurant food retailers, and required them to charge \$0.10 for paper bags. The policy went into effect on May 14, 2014 for businesses larger than 10,000 sq. feet, and 6 months later for the smaller businesses under 10,000 sq. feet.



It is written into the SB law that profits from the paper bag sales are kept by the businesses that sell them.

"I'm excited by the progress being made in Santa Barbara and proud of our nonprofit partners worldwide working to find solutions to plastic pollution," said Johnson. "Plastics have been accumulating in our oceans since the 1950's and the reality of the problem has recently become clear – but we still have time to turn it around."

Santa Barbara's policy and its path to fruition resemble that of many other cities and counties, and based on the reported success in those places, the prospects for creating real impact are promising.

"It took a while for people to realize the relevance of the plastic bag, not only as something that is environmentally damaging, but also as a symbol of our disposable culture," King commented.

Between efforts at home, across the country, and abroad, there is great progress being made in moving away from this disposable culture, but there's much to be done. Please consider the steps you're taking to reduce *your* plastic footprint.

Next time you head out, take a **reusable water bottle** or **your own shopping bag**, and ask your server for water **without** a straw. It's the small things that add up!

*Written by Max Bayuk, LoaTree.*

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MS. Bayuk's class

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Tuesday - 10 / 06 / 2014

We love your article and we thought it was very interesting. We appreciate your group doing this to help the planet. It is unique how so many ideas were tied together in your article. We hope you continue to write to help protect our planet! We were amazed how many plastic bags are out there polluting our earth. The next time we go to the grocery stores, we will bring our own bags. Your article inspired us to stop using plastic. Some of us did not know who Jack Johnson was, so we listened to Upside Down and loved it. You are awesome to the MAX!!!! the students of room 15



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Wednesday - 11 / 06 / 2014

Glad you liked it, Ms. Bayuk, and so happy that you're students are inspired! Keep pushing!

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