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**The average plastic bag is used for about 12 minutes but can take up to 1000 years to decompose.**

### **The problem with plastic bags** **Threats to Marine Life**

Every year, over 6 million tonnes of rubbish is dumped into the world's oceans. An estimated 80% of this is plastic, and 10% is plastic bags.

Plastic is responsible for killing 1 million sea birds and over 100,000 sea mammals each year.<sup>1</sup> Turtles, whales and sea birds mistake plastic bags for food or get entangled in them, resulting in painful injuries, or even death.

### **Waste**

Australians dispose of an estimated 4 billion plastic bags, or around 20,000 tonnes of plastic to landfill each year.<sup>2</sup> These plastic bags are filling up our already limited landfill space as well as polluting waterways and oceans when they escape from landfill sites.

### **Clean Up Costs**

It is estimated that it costs governments, businesses and community groups over \$4 million per annum to clean up littered plastic shopping bags.<sup>3</sup>

### **Facts about plastic bags**

- Australians use over 4 billion plastic bags annually (10 million every day).<sup>4</sup>
- It is estimated world wide that 1 trillion bags are used and discarded every year.
- Plastic bags can become serial killers. Once a bag is ingested, the animal dies and decomposes, releasing the bag back into the environment to kill again.
- **'Degradable' plastic bags** are not biodegradable, and still cause injuries and deaths to marine life, as it takes time for them to break apart into smaller pieces. These bags, made of petroleum-based plastic, break apart more quickly if exposed to sunlight or heat for extended periods of time. They can be recycled.
- **Biodegradable 'plant plastic' bags** are made from farmed products like cornstarch, and in the right conditions, will break down into carbon dioxide, water and methane. Depending on the type of bag, they may still pose a threat to marine life. Biodegradable bags are not suited to recycling and should be composted or sent to landfill.



<sup>1</sup>United Nations Environmental Program, Marine Litter: A Global Challenge, 2009, <http://www.unep.org>  
<sup>2</sup>Environment Australia, Plastic Shopping Bags – Analysis of Levies and Environmental Impacts, Nolan 2002, <http://www.environment.gov.au>  
<sup>3</sup>Planet Ark, <http://plasticbags.planetark.org>

<sup>4</sup>Planet Ark, <http://plasticbags.planetark.org>



# Do your bit to keep paradise plastic free



## Some alternatives

**Reuse bags** – Taking your own bags along when you go shopping is the best option.

- o **Fabric bags** – Cotton or canvas bags are a great alternative to plastic bags. Growing cotton uses water and takes up land area, but these bags last for many years and biodegrade at the end of their life, resulting in minimal lasting pollution or waste problems.
- o **Green bags** – The ‘Green bags’ that are available at supermarkets are still made from plastic, but can last for a long time.

**Reuse boxes** – Many shops are now offering used cardboard boxes for customers. This is a great way to carry your shopping home and reuse what would otherwise be thrown away.

## What to do with used plastic shopping bags

- Once you have them, the best thing to do is to keep using them. Take them along when you go shopping to get the most use out of them.
- Remember not to put your recyclable items into plastic bags before putting them in the bin, as this disrupts the recycling process and they will all end up in landfill instead.
- If you no longer want to use your plastic bags, take them along to a supermarket where they are collected for recycling. Ensure your bags are free from contamination (food scraps or receipts) to aid the recycling process.
- From Cairns, used plastic bags travel to Brisbane and are then transported overseas for recycling. While recycling these bags is a much better option than disposing of them to landfill, the recycling process uses quite a lot of energy and water, so the best option is not to use the bags in the first place.

## We can all help to keep paradise plastic free

- Say “no thanks” to using plastic shopping bags and try to minimise your use of other plastic bags, such as for weighing fruit and vegetables.
- Keep a spare, reusable shopping bag in your handbag or wallet, and a few in the car.
- Contact your local shops or supermarket to encourage them to phase out the use of plastic bags.
- Encourage other people you know to take their own bags when shopping.
- Support a Queensland-wide ban on plastic bags by signing your pledge to go plastic bag free at [www.cafnec.org.au](http://www.cafnec.org.au).



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