

**Sea turtles** often mistake plastic bags for food.

# BAGGING PLASTIC

Los Angeles joins a growing movement to ban plastic shopping bags

BY VERONICA MAJEROL

**M**ost of us do it everyday without much thought: buy things and carry them home in disposable plastic bags.

But a growing effort across the U.S. is aimed at getting people to kick that habit. More than 100 U.S. counties, and major cities—like San Francisco, Seattle, and Austin—now have bans on plastic shopping bags. The movement got a major boost in January, when Los Angeles became the largest U.S. city to ban plastic shopping bags.

“The idea that we grab for a plastic bag in a grocery store has become a part of our culture,” says Zola Berger-Schmitz, a high school junior in L.A. who gathered petitions and presented them to the city council, which approved the ban last

summer. The bans, she says, are “about trying to reduce pollution little by little.”

Zola became concerned about plastic’s impact on the environment three years ago after seeing a film on the so-called Great Pacific Garbage Patch—a vortex of plastic waste and other debris floating between California and Hawaii. Environmentalists say it can swell to twice the size of Texas.

## Choking Sea Turtles & Whales

Americans use about 100 billion plastic bags each year, according to the U.S. International Trade Commission. In 2012, Americans generated about 32 million tons of plastic waste, including shopping bags and beverage bottles, and recycled only about 9 percent of it, the Environmental Protection Agency says. The rest piles up in landfills, where it can take up to 1,000 years to decompose; or washes down sewer

drains; or blows into rivers and oceans.

In the water, plastic bags pose a particular danger to animals like sea turtles, sea birds, and whales, which not only get caught in the bags but often mistake them for food, choke on them, and die.

“We no longer live in a world where we can pretend that what we do on land doesn’t affect the ocean,” says John Hoyer, a marine biologist at Greenpeace.

Are plastic bags also a drain on natural resources? Environmentalists say that plastic bag manufacturing uses up millions of barrels of oil each year, much of it imported from overseas. The plastic bag industry, however, says most plastic bags in the U.S. are made from a by-product of natural gas from the U.S.

Mark Daniels of the American Progressive Bag Alliance, which represents the U.S. plastic bag manufacturing

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