



**Sea of Trash:** A scavenger paddles through a plastic-strewn waterway in the Philippines.

and recycling industry, thinks the bans are misguided. He says 9 out of 10 Americans reuse plastic bags for things like packing lunch, lining trash cans, and picking up after their dogs. The bags can be recycled, he says. And he argues they're more practical than reusable cloth bags.

"Environmentalists truly think every single person is going to leave their house in the morning with their reusable bag because they want to get something at CVS," says Daniels.

The industry also makes an economic argument against the bans: More than 30,000 people across the U.S. have jobs related to plastic bag manufacturing and recycling, says Daniels, and bans jeopardize those jobs.

There's even a movement to ban the bans. After Austin's plastic bag ban went into effect last year, Texas state representative Drew Springer introduced the

Shopping Bag Freedom Act in the legislature to "stop the overreach of big government." The bill is pending.

The U.S. isn't the only place where plastic bag bans have been instituted. China, Italy, Bangladesh, Australia, and Rwanda ban plastic shopping bags.

In the U.S., environmentalists have also been targeting disposable plastic bottles. The town of Concord, Massachusetts, the Grand Canyon and several other national parks, and some universities now ban the sale of plastic water bottles. This month, San Francisco began banning their sale on public property.

Of course, bans aren't the only way to cut plastic use. New York, Pennsylvania,

and Virginia are considering using market forces, like taxes and fees, to discourage people from using plastic bags. Washington, D.C., has had a 5-cent tax on plastic bags for more than four years.

Alex Padilla, a state senator in California, is sponsoring a bill that would make California the first to enact a statewide ban on plastic bags. "We lived for thousands of years without single-use plastic bags," he says. "I think we

will be just fine without them."

But Elisabeth Rosenthal, who covers the environment for *The New York Times*, notes that even progressive cities like New York have had a hard time doing away with plastic bags. In 2008, then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg tried but failed to pass a 6-cent bag tax.

"In a city where dog owners are forced to pick up their pets' waste and are precluded from smoking in parks," Rosenthal writes, "why is it so hard to get people to employ reusable bags for shopping?" •

**100 billion**  
NUMBER of plastic bags Americans use each year.  
SOURCE: U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

**90%**  
PERCENTAGE of Americans who reuse plastic shopping bags.  
SOURCE: THE AMERICAN PLASTIC BAG ALLIANCE



**Can Americans give up plastic bags?**

With reporting by Ian Lovett of *The New York Times*.