

MountainKeeping Column for Aug. 30

## **Learn How to TOTE!**

By Cindy Ball

Over a year ago I made the decision to use only cloth bags for my shopping. This decision has changed the habits and thinking of my entire family.

On the rare occasions when I forget to bring a bag with me, I realize the flimsy unreliability of plastic bags. No wonder baggers tend to put only a few items in each bag, and then often double-bag my purchases. Any more stuff would break the bag! These plastic contraptions aren't made to last, sometimes even as far as the car.

My canvas tote can carry a big jar of spaghetti sauce and a heavy container of juice, along with whatever else I need, and I never have to double bag! I can fill my tote up and not worry.

The year 2002 marked the 25th anniversary of plastic bags, but it's not an anniversary we should celebrate. Each year an estimated 500 billion to 1 trillion plastic bags are consumed worldwide. That comes out to over one million per minute! According to the EPA, over 380 billion plastic bags, wraps, and sacks are consumed in the U.S every year. According to The Wall Street Journal, the U.S. goes through 100 billion plastic shopping bags each year. The estimated cost to retailers is \$4 billion. Can you wrap your brain around those numbers? I can't. Those figures simply boggle the mind.

Ordinary plastic bags don't biodegrade. They often end up as ugly litter all over the landscape, where they *will* eventually photo-degrade, breaking down under sunlight into smaller and smaller toxic bits that contaminate soil and waterways, entering the food chain when animals accidentally ingest them, especially marine animals.

A 2001 paper by Japanese researchers reported that plastic debris acts like a sponge for toxic chemicals, soaking up a million-fold greater concentrations of such deadly compounds as PCBs and DDE (a breakdown product of the notorious insecticide DDT), than the surrounding seawater. These turn into toxic gut bombs for marine animals which frequently mistake these bits for food.

If the litter costs of plastic bags are high, the production costs are even higher, requiring vast amounts of petroleum and toxic chemicals. These costs to society are leading some locales to propose a tax on plastic bags, and San Francisco has now banned them outright. Large retailers, such as IKEA, are also forging the way for plastic bag-free shopping experiences simply by not offering free bags.

Probably everyone reading this owns at least one reusable cloth or canvas tote bag. If not, you can pick one up at a garage sale for a quarter or buy one of MountainKeepers' bags for \$5. You can obtain one by writing [keepers@mountainkeepers.org](mailto:keepers@mountainkeepers.org).

To discourage the use of plastic and to encourage reusable bags, some retail stores will give a small amount of money to a non-profit each time you don't use plastic. EarthFare is a local store that donates to a "non-profit of the month," if you bring your own tote. (The month of January 2008 the non-profit of the month will be MountainKeepers at EarthFare.) If you are shopping there and forget your tote, you can ask for recycled bags. That way you can be giving to good non-profits while helping to conquer some of our country's dependence on plastic.

This simple act can change the world, if we all do it together. Check out [www.reusablebags.com](http://www.reusablebags.com) for additional information.