

Millions of pieces of rubbish are washed into the ocean daily. From bits and pieces of plastic bags to wood debris to fleece jackets and other articles of clothing. This rubbish is just the everyday plastic bag or lolly wrapper that didn't make it into the bin. What people don't realize, is that the shopping bag they carelessly dropped will be swept down the road and into a sewerage drain. It will float its way into the river, or the ocean, and will join many other pieces of rubbish on its way through the ocean's current. In this article, we will follow the journey of a plastic bag, from the factory to the ocean and beyond.

The journey begins in a factory, where pollution chokes the air. There, pellets of polyethylene plastic are melted into sheets of plastic film. The workers cut the sheets of plastic with a hot knife, handles are shaped, and the bags are packaged and sent to supermarkets around the globe. They are unpacked in the store, and as customers fill the kiosks, the bags are packed full of groceries and piled into trolleys.

On the way through the parking lot, one plastic bag escapes from the trolley, and a gust of wind sends it skittering down the road. Nobody bothers to stop the potentially fatal plastic bag, tumbling down the road. No one is concerned. This is a common sight in downtown Gisborne. Crossing between cars, racing through busy intersections, it eventually finds its way to the river.

The bag floats onwards with the tide, until it reaches the open ocean. It bobs through the water, traveling with the ocean's current. From the Southern Pacific Ocean, it is carried north, past the equator.



Rubbish found on Wainui Beach, Gisborne

As it nears the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a bottlenose dolphin swims directly into the plastic bag, getting it caught around its nose. It writhes violently, trying to remove the bag, but the thin plastic blocks the dolphin's airway. This dolphin is one of the lucky ones that survives and manages to escape.

The bag floats on, now in tiny bits and pieces called microplastics. It soon reaches the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and joins millions and millions of pieces of plastic and other ocean debris. What's left of the bag will spend the rest of its life here, if not forever.

This is a never ending story. When will we face the reality?

Facts:

- Plastic never breaks down completely.
- Ocean debris and plastic kills over 1 million seabirds and over 100 thousand sea mammals each year.
- Plastic will only get smaller and smaller, easier and easier for sea-life to ingest.
- All the plastic in the ocean, will be there forever.

If we don't stop the plastic bags, the ocean will become clogged with plastic.

Presently, huge amounts of plastic and litter float in the ocean forming 'islands' where the currents meet. These are called gyres, and there's 5 of them. The Indian Ocean Gyre, the North and South Pacific Ocean Gyres, as well as the North and South Atlantic Gyres. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch, also known as the North Pacific Gyre, is a huge area of ocean filled with microplastics, tiny pieces of plastic that are invisible to the naked eye. It is simply a cloudy, polluted soup.

In Gisborne, there is evidence of reducing plastic in the community. Local shops and multiple stalls at the farmers market are wrapping products in paper and encouraging customers to bring their own reusable shopping bags.

There are plenty of ways *you* can help the environment and decrease the amount of plastic ending up in the ocean:

1. Bring your own reusable shopping bags to the supermarket.
2. Recycle or compost as much of your household waste as you can.
3. Say no to one use plastic straws.
4. Use glass or cardboard packaging rather than plastic.

Hopefully, this article will inspire you to do your part in phasing out single-use plastic bags. Without them, this world will be a better, cleaner, place. What will you do?

*~Article and Photo by Sabine Lapointe~*