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Jeremy Feigenbaum '11: Reduce, reuse, return to Eastside Marketplace

By:

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Whenever I empty my garbage in Caswell's basement, there are plastic bags in the trash bins. And most days, as I walk down Thayer Street to Grad Center, I come across bags lying on the sidewalk. I never used to pick them up. I assumed that these light objects could do little damage.

As part of a project for ENV51410: "Environmental Law and Policy," four of my classmates and I conducted research on legislation that seeks to reduce plastic bag litter. To write about the bill, I had to study why it was necessary in the first place. I quickly learned that plastic waste causes far greater problems than I had recognized.

There is always the obvious issue: An average plastic bag will fill up space in a landfill for thousands of years. Since Earth has finite space and the human population is growing rapidly, unnecessary waste is a real concern.

The disposal of plastic bags not only consumes more space in landfills, but also spurs the production of more bags. This has an immediate impact on human health because plastic manufacturing releases carcinogenic benzene gas into the air. Just as problematic, the creation and transportation of plastic bags - frequently from Asia - usually employs fossil fuels and thereby contributes to global warming and makes it difficult for the United States to become energy independent.

Beyond carbon emissions and carcinogens, littered bags pose other serious problems. Plastic bags are often blown great distances, due to their light weight. They end up in state parks, on lawns and in waterways and oceans.

In the water, bags kill animals by suffocating or immobilizing them, or by interfering with their digestion. According to the United Nations, thousands of pieces of plastic coat the surface of every square mile of ocean.

Plastic bags, which most people frequently use but rarely think about, have a deadly impact on the environment, animal populations and human welfare. People should start cutting back on their use of new plastic bags immediately. Thankfully, Rhode Island has already made rapid change possible.

Last year, the state legislature passed the Plastic Bag Recovery Act of 2008. This bill mandates that large retail establishments selling goods and food in the state allow customers to return any plastic bag to them - even if the store did not dispense that bag. These stores must maintain collection barrels for plastic and then send what they receive to nearby recycling plants. Residents only need to bring back their old bags the next time they go shopping; the state has taken care of the rest.

Some of the stores closest to Brown are participating in this program. There are four stores near campus that take back bags: Carcieri's Market, Eastside Marketplace, Shaw's and Stop & Shop. Brown students - especially those who are regular customers - should start bringing their plastic bags with them.

But there is an even more effective option: Bags can be reused. After I brought my textbooks to Caswell at the beginning of this semester, I threw the bags out. But I went back to the bookstore three times (I had trouble choosing classes) and could have used those bags again. Even though plastic bags might not seem like a necessity, there are often opportunities for reuse.

Most important, however, is the need to stop using disposable plastic bags altogether. The Brown Bookstore sells reusable cloth bags and even gave some away to students who made large enough purchases. Cloth bags are clearly the best option in environmental terms.

Reduce, reuse, recycle is an underappreciated mantra. Nearly everyone can recite it, but few truly practice it. Government initiatives are important - and we're lucky that Rhode Island has taken the lead in this area - but individual changes are necessary too. Reducing the use of plastic bags is easy and beneficial. Why not start now?

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