

Q&A: Sustainability manager on the benefits of a plastic bag ban

November 6 2020, by Lindsay Dowling-Savelle



A plastic bag is used on average for 12 minutes, and can take over 500 years to decompose, explains D'Souza. Credit: Pexels

It's estimated that each Nova Scotian is responsible for approximately 450 plastic bags ending up in landfills each year. As of last week, Nova Scotia became the third province in Canada to officially ban the use such plastic shopping bags by retailers. The purpose of the Plastic Bags

Reduction Act is to reduce the use of plastic bags and other single-use plastic products that contribute to air and water pollution every day.

By adhering to the [plastic-bag](#) ban, retailers and consumers could reduce plastic waste and the harmful effects it has on our environment and our health. We asked Kareina D'Souza, sustainability manager in Dalhousie's Office of Sustainability, about the environmental impacts the ban will have and how retailers and consumers can make further changes to their daily lives to reduce the use of single-use plastics and waste.

What are the environmental benefits of banning plastic bags?

Plastic pollution is one of our most pressing environmental issues, and due to its prevalence in our lives, a difficult problem to tackle. The public has become more aware of plastic's impact on the environment, but before the ban thousands of plastics bags were being used daily. Banning plastic bags helps reduce the number of bags that end up in landfills, by reducing their use at the source. A plastic bag is used on average for 12 minutes, and can take over 500 years to decompose—all the while leaking pollutants into the soil and water. If plastic ends up in the ocean, it slowly breaks up into smaller and [smaller pieces](#) called microplastics which harms ocean life. Ultimately, plastic polymers do not readily break down into harmless chemicals, so a cultural shift is required to reduce our dependence on them overall. A plastic-bag ban is one place to start that shift.

What happens to plastic bags that are already in circulation?

According to the province, any remaining plastic bags left in stores after the ban should be recycled, sold off, or donated to charities, which are

still allowed to use them. If people still have bags in their homes, my best advice is to reuse them as much as possible before discarding them appropriately.

What viable alternatives are there to using plastic bags?

The best option for shoppers to use is reusable bags over any single-use option. Stores may start offering paper bags or claim their plastic bags are "biodegradable," but it's a much better choice to carry bags with you to the store that you continue to reuse as long as possible. Although paper bags can be composted or recycled, they still have a carbon footprint. Certain companies will label their plastic as "biodegradable" in an attempt to greenwash their product, but that type of plastic may not be able to be composted in a traditional system and ends up in the landfill. It may take a while to get used not having the option to carry your groceries in a plastic bag, but it's a step in the right direction. Reducing our reliance on single-use plastics is a much-needed change in order to minimize our negative impact the environment.

What steps can governments, retailers and consumers take to further limit the use of plastic bags and other single-use plastics?

Plastic use is hard to avoid, especially right now with additional precautions required due to COVID-19. That being said, there are still many ways we can reduce plastic waste in our lives. We should ask ourselves these questions to determine how necessary [plastic](#) use is:

- Can I avoid using this item?
- Are there alternatives that are reusable for this item?
- Can I reuse this item?
- How much purpose will this item have?

- How long will I need this item?
- Where will this item end up when I discard it?

Provided by Dalhousie University

Citation: Q&A: Sustainability manager on the benefits of a plastic bag ban (2020, November 6) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-11-qa-sustainability-benefits-plastic-bag.html>

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