

## YOU CANNOT PAPER OVER THE PLASTIC<sup>1</sup>

Michael Todd©

When we throw something away, where exactly is “away”? The new documentary film, *Bag It*, notes that “just because something is disposable doesn’t mean it goes away. After all, where is away? There is no away.” Plastic bags and their one-use disposable plastic kin will, like death and taxes, be with us always. And like taxes, there always seems to be more and more plastic debris. In the United States, for example, Americans use an average of 500 plastic bags per person a year — or 60,000 every five minutes. Bags not your bag? How about the 2 million plastic bottles consumed every five minutes or the million disposable cups U.S. airline flights plow through every six hours? This, it makes clear, is a lot to digest — or not, if, say, you’re a sea turtle.

Still, in the era of global warming and other mega-threats, as the film’s narrator asks, “Why pick on plastic bags?” In part, says Daniel Imhoff, author of the book, *Paper or Plastic*, plastic bags, which have been available since 1977, are the No. 1 consumer item in the world. *Bag It* arrives in the middle of political efforts around the world to either ban or tax plastic (and increasingly, paper) bags. China, rarely spotted in the environmental avant-garde, banned ultra-thin plastic bags in 2008; some 40 billion fewer bags were used within a year. Washington, D.C. created “a behavioral economist’s dream,” as our Emily Badger reported, when it started charging a nickel for every paper or plastic bag consumers use at grocery stores.

In possibly the biggest battle so far over bags, California’s Legislature will decide by Tuesday whether to ban plastic bags and tax paper ones. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has said — but not promised — he’d sign bill AB1998, by Assemblywoman Julia Brownley, if it reaches his desk. California has already been a leader in the ban-the-bag effort; San Francisco in 2007 became the first U.S. city to ban plastic bags. *Bag It* certainly supports such action, less as a goal in itself than as a first step on a journey. “Sure, it’s low-hanging fruit,” said director Suzan Beraza, “and it’s not going to change anyone’s life. But once you make the change, you start thinking about all sorts of things you can do.”

The film, now in limited release at film festivals and church halls everywhere, follows a schlubby Jeb Berrier — a proxy for Beraza — after he buys a container of peach yogurt. “I mean I’m an average guy,” he tells us. “I’m not what you consider a tree hugger. I try to be informed, I try to do the right thing, but I find it can all be a bit overwhelming at times.” He starts thinking about the plastic bag he brought the yogurt home in; his epiphany is amplified when his hometown (and that of film company Reel Thing Films), Telluride, Colo., challenges its citizens to reduce plastic bag use. His voyage of discovery eventually moves on to other disposable plastics, to efforts to restrict their use, to find an “away” for the waste whether in landfills or the middle of the nearest ocean, to see the imperfect application of recycling, and lastly, to examine the health impacts of many consumer plastics. This is accompanied by lots of interviews, ranging from a man collecting all his trash for a year in his basement to eco-scientists like Sylvia Earle and Theo Colburn. Oh, and Berrier and his wife have their first child in the middle of his odyssey.

If that sounds like a lot to cover in 79 minutes, it is.

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<sup>1</sup> Miller-McCune, August 27, 2010

*Bag It* suffers a malady shared by so many well-meaning documentaries — a mission creep that requires *just one more fact* on top of the heap already making your brain hurt. Luckily for the viewer, the message's packaging is friendly and easy to absorb. Evidence of that rests in the string of audience choice awards the documentary has earned at various film festivals in the Western United States.

It's not a fun film exactly — the scenes showing charismatic animals tangled up in plastic ensure that — but it is light without being insubstantial. On the whole, it avoids preachiness and finger-pointing. And in a closing that warms the heart of solutions-oriented Miller-McCune, it ends with a series of common-sense and relatively achievable actions that ordinary people can take right now to reduce their plastic footprint.

Refreshingly for an environmentally themed picture, *Bag It* mostly avoids heavy-handed anti-corporate messages, although as the film devolves, the American Chemistry Council, in particular, takes its lumps. Some or even most of the lumps are either self-inflicted or deserved (while 92 percent of the more than 200 government-sponsored studies have shown health issues arising from the plastic additives BPS or phthalates, none of the 20 sponsored by the industry have), but a handful seem kind of cheap. Beraza said showing the other side of the issue, and there is one, was made incredibly difficult — by the other side. “At the beginning we really wanted to show the other side. We tried and tried to get them in the film and actually had five interviews taped.” But all those interviewees signed contracts allowing them to revoke permission to show their interviews, and all of them eventually backed out.

Berrier's *Roger and Me*-esque efforts to contact pro-bag forces are a running theme throughout *Bag It*. One particularly damning bit of an interview transcript — whether plastic-stuffed birds died from being crammed with bottle caps — is re-enacted. Meanwhile, the filmmakers have been careful not to be anti-plastic, just anti-wasteful plastic. “Plastic is an incredibly valuable resource,” says Seattle City Councilman Richard Conlin, whose municipality voted down a 20-cent tax on bags last year. “It's something that really has a purpose in society, and it needs to be used for that purpose.” Throwaway bags aren't one of them. Or as German chemist and author Michael Braungart says, “It's not about being against chemistry or against plastic. It's about being against stupid plastic — silly, stinking, toxic stuff.”