

Paper, Plastic or Neither?

By Mathew Tyler Funk

While standing in mild trepidation at the check-out counter you hear a meager voice from what seems like a far distant land quietly inquire "Paper or plastic, Ma'am?" Your already briskly-paced heart nearly bursts out of your chest cavity as a voice inside your head screams "No, no, oh God please not those!" Speaking through chattering teeth as you fight off the nearly-overwhelming urge to fall to the floor and suffer through a series of epileptic seizures you hear your trembling voice utter: "Neither, thank you."

It is then that the bagger finally notices the reusable burlap sacks in your cart and you are saved from any further explanation. You breathe a sigh of relief as the bagger and cashier shoot one another poorly disguised glances which carry an unspoken message that seems to translate as "check out this loony."

You breathe a sigh of relief as the bagger and cashier shoot one another poorly disguised glances which carry an unspoken message that seems to translate as "check out this loony."

While we all have known for quite some time that plastic grocery bags are a horrendous problem for the environment, what has been overlooked is that paper bags are equally as destructive. I know this may be somewhat elementary for those readers who are perhaps a bit more environmentally savvy, but paper bags are made from paper, which is made from trees. Trees are cut down by huge companies like Weyerhaeuser and others who diligently run around, clear-cutting the last of the less than five percent of ancient forests remaining in North America, while simultaneously laying waste to vast expanses of rainforest in the Amazon and elsewhere.

Clearcutting is bad (obviously) for the environment because it not only kills ALL of the trees in any given area - which would be bad enough - but it also kills EVERYTHING that lives in, on or around those trees. Non-tree plants do not escape, nor do any of the animals that live in underground burrows or anywhere in the entire portion of clear-cut forest. It's worse than just the simple problem of habitat destruction. The problem is bigger than a bunch of homeless and hungry squirrels and chipmunks. Clearcuts turn the entire landscape into a deadzone, and the soil itself becomes toxic because there is such a wide-ranging conversion from the living to the dead that all the rotting plant-matter and, soon after, animal-matter makes it impossible for anything except perhaps gangrene and other flesh-eating bacterias and fungi to live there.

The seemingly noble (but in reality little more than symbolic) efforts to reseed these areas consistently fail because the soil becomes too toxic for anything to grow in. Yes, dead things do fertilize the soil, but there must be a balance of living things to keep the area non-toxic and livable for complex organisms. Have you ever put too much fertilizer in a flower-pot? Have you ever tried to grow something in all fertilizer and no soil? What

happens is whatever you're trying to grow either does not grow or gets burnt out and dies very quickly, and what ends up growing (if it's natural fertilizer) is fungus and bacteria.

Paper bags are truly harmful to the environment and should not be considered an environmentally friendly alternative to plastic.

And let's not pretend that paper bags are environmentally friendly once they are disposed of either. Paper bags take more time to degrade than you might think. They are treated with lots of chemicals from the step in the process when the trees are ground up into pulp for making the paper, to the step where the pulp is screened and dried to form the paper, to the point when the corporate grocer's emblem and advertising

literature is printed on the bag. During the pulp-making chemicals are used in conjunction with grinders to break the material down; during the screening and drying process chemicals are used to bond the paper and make it strong while allowing it to remain relatively thin; and of course ink is used during the printing.

We haven't even touched on the environmental impact of the use of all the energy it takes to make those paper bags, or to ship them by the truckload to the store where they will be used. Paper bags are truly harmful to the environment and should not be considered an environmentally friendly alternative to plastic.

If you would rather not be ripped off by corporate grocers for those tiny burlap bags they sell which are intentionally designed to hold less than the free paper and plastic alternatives, simply bring your own bags. If they won't allow you to use eco-friendly bags other than the ones they provide (which shows you where environmentally-conscious corporate policies are really rooted), simply keep your own bags back out at the car, and refuse any bags from the check-out counter at all. Bag your own groceries when you get out to the car...but make sure you have your receipts!

"Sometimes you're the bug, and sometimes you're the windshield."

Tyler is a beard-wearing young adult who enjoys being invited to dinner and doing his best to better himself and his community; even though that often means different things to different people.

Read more from his [Eco Blog at Helium](#).