

**COVER Story**

# The Problem With



Plastic makes our lives easier—but it's also hurting the environment.

**Y**our toothbrush. Your headphones. A bottle of juice or a cereal bar wrapper. You may not realize it, but you probably use or touch plastic dozens of times each day.

You're not alone. For years, people have sipped from plastic straws and carried groceries in plastic bags. But nearly all the plastic we use gets thrown away. In fact, in the time it takes to read this sentence, Americans will have tossed more than

20,000 pounds of plastic! All that waste is causing big problems for the planet.

That's why people around the U.S. are working to reduce plastic usage. But will their efforts be enough?

### Making Life Easier

Plastic as we know it was invented in the early 1900s. But for most Americans, it didn't become a big part of everyday life until the 1950s. That's when

companies began to make household goods with plastic.

**Disposable** plates, cups, and other items were advertised as a way to save time. Instead of washing dishes, people could simply throw them out after every meal.

Over time, plastic became a low-cost, **durable** replacement for other materials. Plastic bottles don't shatter like glass ones. And plastic bags are sturdier than paper bags.



A hermit crab with a plastic bottle top in place of its shell.

Today, at least 40 percent of all plastic produced is single-use. That means it's used only once and then thrown away. Experts say single-use plastic is creating the biggest problems, especially in the sea.

### Oceans of Plastic

What happens to the plastic we throw away? Only about 9 percent of it gets recycled. Most of the rest ends up in landfills, buried under layers of dirt. Experts think this plastic may take centuries to decompose, or break down.

But a lot of plastic trash never reaches landfills. Instead, it becomes litter on the street. Rain and wind carry that litter into storm drains or rivers that flow to the ocean.

When plastic waste ends up

in the ocean, the results can be deadly. Last year, a dead sperm whale washed ashore in Spain. Scientists found that the whale had eaten 64 pounds of plastic, including plastic bags, fishing nets, and even a plastic drum.

It's not just big pieces of plastic that can be dangerous, though. In the ocean, sunlight and waves break down plastic into much smaller pieces. These tiny bits are called microplastics. They contain chemicals that can harm seabirds, turtles, and fish that swallow them.

### Pitching In

Communities and businesses across the country are trying to tackle the plastic problem. Plastic grocery bags are banned in dozens of cities. Plus, many businesses, such as Hilton hotels and SeaWorld theme parks, are no longer giving out single-use plastic straws.

But it doesn't take an entire city or a big company to make a difference. Experts say we can all do our part by reducing the amount of plastic we use. They suggest we start by thinking more about the little decisions we make every day. So ask yourself: Do you really need that straw or plastic bag?

—by Laura Anastasia

#### WORDS TO KNOW

**disposable** adjective. made to be thrown away after use

**durable** adjective. tough and able to last a long time

Close-Reading Questions

**Leveled Cover Story**



**KIDS**  
**MAKING CHANGE**

**Names:** Sofia Gordon, Luca Barresi, Francesca Trotta, Veronica Osei-Owusu

**Hometown:** Longmeadow, Massachusetts

**What They Did:** The sixth-graders helped get a law passed in their town. Starting April 22, stores in Longmeadow will no longer be allowed to give out plastic bags to customers.

**How They Did It:** Two years ago, the kids learned about the effects of plastic.

"We wanted to do something in our school to fix this madness," says Sofia.

They convinced officials at their elementary school to buy recycling bins. Then they gave a presentation to town lawmakers and suggested the plastic bag ban. Now they're working to get recycling bins put in every school in their town.

"We are the future. If we do not make a change, who will?"  
 —Francesca Trotta

**A GLOBAL PROBLEM:** Plastic waste in a lake in Bulgaria, a country in Europe, in 2009

