

# Paper or Plastic ... or Neither

Will vegetable-based, biodegradable bags replace plastic and paper at the supermarket?

## Plastic Bags

Polyethylene, the material used to make the typical shopping bag, is made from fossil fuels—it takes roughly 12 million barrels of oil a year to satisfy America's plastic-bag demands. And since discarded plastic bags don't biodegrade and stick around for eons, they're free to wreak havoc on wildlife and ecosystems; there were an estimated 46,000 pieces of plastic floating in every square mile of ocean in 2007!

## Paper bags

AND, according to one EPA estimate, producing a paper bag emits 70 percent more greenhouse gases than manufacturing a similarly sized polyethylene sack. Since paper bags are bulkier than their plastic counterparts, they require more fossil fuel to transport. Also, supplying the US with paper bags requires chopping down about 14 million carbon-soaking trees per year.

## Bioplastic bags

Bioplastic bags, by contrast, are made from resources like corn or potatoes that are significantly more renewable than trees. When discarded, bioplastic bags are designed to break down completely in a matter of weeks, leaving behind water and the carbon dioxide the corn or potatoes had absorbed before they were harvested. There have been complaints that this rapid decay can only take place under certain conditions, such as the intense heat of an industrial composting facility, although newer bags are designed to degrade more easily.

There is a land-use component to the issue: It would take a lot of corn to replace 100 billion polyethylene bags per year, which means that to make the required bags, a lot more land would have to be placed under cultivation with herbicides and pesticides to safeguard the crops.

So, start at the beginning and make the greenest choice - "none of the above." Your best bet is to use and reuse a cloth bag; one that fits your needs for the things you buy and that will last through years of shopping.

**TRASH TRAVELS – CHOOSE TO REDUCE – BRING YOUR OWN BAGS**