



# PLASTIC BAGS IN THE LOWCOUNTRY

## Abundance

- The Ocean Conservancy organizes an annual international beach sweep each September. In 2016, volunteers collected more than 500,000 plastic bags, making plastic bags the fifth most collected item worldwide.
- Locally, South Carolina Sea Grant Consortium sponsors the Ocean Conservancy's beach sweep. In September of 2016, 558 Beaufort County volunteers participated in the local cleanup effort. Using South Carolina's average hourly wage, their total volunteer time was worth \$26,000.
- Every year, Americans collectively use and trash 100 billion plastic bags. To make that many bags, it takes 12 million barrels of oil – the equivalent of 12 percent of the entire state's oil consumption in 2015.

## Marine Impact

- Worldwide, plastic bag pollution negatively affects more than 700 species of marine life.
- Sea turtles often mistake plastic bags for jellyfish, a favorite food source for turtles. Bags block turtles' stomachs and can cause them to starve to death. The South Carolina Aquarium's sea turtle hospital in Charleston has treated 17 turtles for ailments stemming from plastic ingestion. In one case, a single turtle had eaten at least 12 pieces of plastic bag material.
- In sunlight and seawater, plastic bags easily break down into pieces of plastic less than five millimeters in size, known as microplastics. Microplastics never fully decompose.
- Microplastics act as sponges for chemicals and toxins in the environment. As plastics break down, toxins are continuously absorbed and released.
- Fish, mussels, shrimp and oysters eat microplastics. When we eat fish and shellfish that have consumed microplastics, we are consuming microplastics, too.

## Use and Disposal

- On average, a plastic bag is used for 12 minutes. Between 1 and 5 percent of all plastic bags are recycled. The remaining bags make their way into the environment or a landfill.
- Plastic bags clog storm drains. Clogged storm drains can cause flooding and stagnant water that makes for ideal mosquito breeding habitat.
- Plastic bags are expensive, difficult to dispose and tough to recycle. Charleston County recycling facilities no longer accept plastic bags because plastic bags clog machine rotors.

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