



## Bag It Discussion Guide

Director: Suzan Beraza

Year: 2010

Time: 74 min

**You might know this director from:**

Uranium Drive-In (2013)

### FILM SUMMARY

In this humorous and informative film, **BAG IT** presents a compelling investigation into how plastic has come to dominate our lives, and how unaware most of us are to the harm it does to our environment, our bodies, and our children's health.

The film presents "everyman" Jeb Berrier who considers himself an average American, not an environmental activist. Jeb's investigation begins with simple questions: "Do we need plastic bags? What are they made from? Where do they go when we throw them away?" Soon, Jeb discovers that plastics - usually made into single-use disposable items - are made from a finite source of fossil fuels, how bits of plastic are contaminating the oceans and endangering marine life, how plastic is shipped to other countries to be recycled in an exploitative and harmful manner, and how hormone-disrupting chemicals in plastics leach into our bodies, jeopardizing our developmental and reproductive systems. The ubiquity of plastic becomes even more troublesome for Jeb when he learns that his partner is pregnant. Jeb's concern for his child's growth and development leads to alarming discoveries about the chemicals found in baby bottles, baby food packaging, and other baby products.

However, **BAG IT** is not an alarmist film. It's eye-opening, but ultimately hopeful, reminding viewers that despite the corporate interests behind plastic, we as consumers have a choice in what we purchase and how we can use and reuse what we buy. Jeb's journey is a transformative one. **BAG IT** invites us to join him.

## FILM THEMES

BAG IT does not vilify plastic. The film simply asks us to use plastic safely and wisely, to be more aware of what we buy, and to understand that what we consider disposable actually lasts for hundreds of years.

### ENVIRONMENT

Plastic seems cheap, plentiful, and easy, but the costs are high considering that it's made from fossil fuels that are non-renewable and quickly-depleting. This use of petroleum is wasteful, and as is the production and transport costs. Since landfills are filled to capacity, discarded plastic is being transported to other countries to be processed and recycled. Moreover, plastic often accumulates in the ocean. It's ingested by marine life, killing them and making them toxic to humans when consumed. Plastic's ubiquity threatens the health of our oceans, which is fundamental to balancing the earth's entire ecosystem.

### GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE

The U.S. exports its plastic to be recycled in other countries, particularly China, that lack regulations to protect workers from the toxicity released into the air and water. The film asks us to consider the impact of our purchases, as they impact real people all over the world for generations to come. Recently, China implemented new regulations to lower pollution. Port inspectors have suspended hundreds of import licenses, rejecting scrap that's too contaminated. Consequently, U.S. recycling centers have had to improve their sorting and cleaning instead of simply shipping the problem away to the other side of the world.

### HUMAN HEALTH

Some landfills have been closed due to the risk of contamination of nearby soil and water. But even in our homes, the chemicals in plastic have a negative, accumulative effect on our health. For example, BPA acts as an endocrine disruptor, inhibiting normal hormonal action. The BPA in baby bottles and baby formula packages impact a child's development, one effect being gender neutrality. BPA exposure has been linked to breast cancer, prostate cancer, miscarriage, low sperm count, and autism. Phthalates are also found in plastics. They're not chemically bound, so they're continuously released into our air, food, and bodies.

### REGULATIONS AND CORPORATE POWER

The powerful and wealthy American Chemistry Council (ACC) has 130 corporation members who protect the interest of plastic and chemicals. Regulations in the U.S. are much weaker than in Europe. In the U.S., a chemical is assumed innocent until its harm is proven. Plastic bag bans and fees have been aggressively challenged by the ACC with lawsuits and lobbying against proposed bills. The lack of adequate regulation also affects recycling. Many products feature a recycling symbol as a marketing ploy, though only some of it may actually be recyclable.

**“Why would you make something that you’re going to use for a few minutes out of a material that’s basically going to last forever, and you’re just going to throw it away? What’s up with that?”**

Jeb Berrier

**“I wanted to change the world. But I have found that the only thing one can be sure of changing is oneself.”**

Aldous Huxley



## FILM FACTS:

- BAG IT was filmed in the Bahamas, England, Germany, Ireland, Midway Atoll, and various states across the U.S.
- In 2007, San Francisco became the first city in the U.S. to enforce a plastic bag ban, eliminating them at large grocery stores. This ban extended to retail stores in 2012, and to restaurants in 2013. In California, nearly 90 cities and counties have adopted plastic bag bans. In 2014, Los Angeles, became the largest city in the U.S. to enforce the ban. In 2012, Hawaii became the first state to adopt a ban on plastic bags.
- Before San Jose's ban was enforced in 2012, plastic bags littered the storm drains and contributed to flooding. Since the ban, the litter has fallen by almost 90%.
- Ireland passed a plastic bag tax in 2002. Within the first year, there was a 90% drop in bag use.
- The global consumption of bottled water rises 10% annually. In the U.S., the average number of plastic bottles used per person annually is 167.
- In California, tap water costs around one tenth of a cent per gallon. Bottled water is 90 cents per gallon. That means tap water is 560 times less expensive than bottled water.
- Making water bottles uses 17 million barrels of oil annually. It takes 3 times the amount of water in a plastic bottle to make the plastic bottle itself.
- It takes about 450 years for plastic to begin decomposing. It takes another 50-80 years to decompose completely. Thus, every single piece of plastic in the world has not yet decomposed.
- The U.S. ships 50-75% of the material collected from recycling programs to China each year, along with scrap like wire cables, broken motors, and industrial and commercial cast-offs. In total, this is 46 million metric tons of scrap metal, paper, rubber, and plastic, valued at roughly \$11 billion USD.
- In 2011, the U.S. recycled roughly 53 million tons of paper and paperboard. About 16 million tons were sent to China. Half of U.S. plastics go to China to be recycled. Recently, China has implemented Operation Green Fence to prohibit the import of unwashed post-consumer plastics and other contaminated waste.
- Congress in August 2008 passed a bill banning phthalates in products for children under 12.
- The plastics industry has spent millions of dollars lobbying lawmakers to vote against state-wide plastic bag bans in California and other states. Hilex Poly, one of the largest manufacturers of plastic bags in the U.S., spent more than \$1 million lobbying against a California ban in 2010. That bill failed. Hilex Poly has given political donations to every Democrat in the California Senate who joined the Republicans in voting against 2013's proposed bill. That bill also failed.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others a chance to learn about ways they can reduce their consumption of plastic. Or host a screening at your school, festival, non-profit meeting, church, or community organization.
2. Build a plan for reducing your use of plastics. Even small changes quickly add up to substantial changes.
3. Become a Bag It Education Advocate for your community. Visit the official film website to learn how you can receive Educational DVDs and companion curriculum guides for schools or libraries.
4. Educate yourself and others about plastic bag legislation at [plasticbaglaws.org](http://plasticbaglaws.org). Get involved and contact your representatives to support plastic bag regulation.