

# PLASTIC OCEAN PROJECT

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March 17, 2017

RE: HB 271

Dear Dare County Representative Beverly Boswell:

On behalf of Plastic Ocean Project, we write to express our support for the current Bag Ban Ordinance, specifically ‘An Act to Reduce Plastic and Non-recycled Paper Bag Use on North Carolina’s Outer Banks’ (SENATE BILL 1018), ratified June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2009. This bill has mitigated the negative impacts from carryout bags distributed at supermarkets, retail pharmacies, and convenience stores. The current bag ban in place in Dare County was enacted in part due to the fact that ‘discarded plastic bags contribute to overburdened landfills, threaten wildlife and marine life, degrade the beaches and other natural landscapes of North Carolina’s coast, and, in many cases, require consumption of oil and natural gas during the manufacturing process’<sup>1</sup>.

Plastic bags are one of the most ubiquitous consumer items designed to use for minutes yet persist in our marine environment indefinitely. The average person uses 360 single-use plastic bags every year resulting in 100 billion plastic grocery bags being thrown away by Americans alone.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 60 to 80% of all marine debris and 90% of floating debris is plastic and comes from mostly land-based sources.<sup>3</sup> Plastic pollution poses a persistent threat to marine life. In a review that looked at all the documented peer reviewed publications on marine life impacted by plastic debris, it revealed over 690 species negatively impacted by means of ingestion or entanglement.<sup>4</sup> In 2009, roughly 3.8 million tons of waste, such as bags, sacks, and wraps, were generated in the United States with only a fraction recycled.<sup>5</sup> The remainder of these bags end up in our landfills or as litter clogging storm drain systems or making their way to our waterways and ocean.<sup>6</sup>

According to beach survey data provided from the Ocean Conservancy and the Marine Debris Tracker App, from 2013 – 2016, plastic bags have consistently been found on all of the major Outer Banks beaches, from Kitty Hawk to Ocracoke Island. Over 1,700 plastic bags have been collected on NC beaches. This makes up approximately 1% of plastic found on NC beaches. While the plastic bags comprise of just a small fraction of coastal litter, the long-term impacts of this durable material also needs to be taken into consideration. Single use plastic bags can persist in the environment for decades to centuries. Although NC survey data before the current Bag Ban Ordinance is not available, bag bans in other communities have proved to be very successful in keeping plastic waste off our beaches and out of the ocean. A study by San Jose, California found that for a plastic bag ban instituted in 2011, as led to an 89 percent decrease of bag litter in the storm drain system, 60 percent in the creeks and rivers, and 59 percent in city streets and neighborhoods.<sup>9</sup>

Plastic bags found on beaches end up in the ocean. Last fall, Plastic Ocean Project took UNC-Wilmington research students offshore near Cape Lookout and 1 out of 7 items removed from the ocean was some form of plastic film. Lifting the ban will most likely increase that number due to

bags being lightweight, which causes them to easily become litter. Given the close proximity of Hatteras to the ocean, the probability is much greater for discarded bags to end up there.

According to [www.darenc.com](http://www.darenc.com):

“Since we are surrounded by water, any discarded trash could end up in our waterways. *This is especially true for plastic bags* and cigarette butts, which can take up to twelve years to break down and have been found in the stomachs of birds and marine animals.”<sup>7</sup>

Recently an area off the coast of Cape Hatteras was recognized for its unique ecological importance as a Hope Spot. This area has also been designated as a Wildlife Refuge and National Seashore by the federal government due to the importance of protecting these pristine areas and its wildlife. This area lies just 40 miles off the coast of the Outer Banks and is characterized by colder, nutrient-rich waters converging with the warm waters of the Gulf Stream. The Hatteras region is also home to one of the most important fishing sites on the entire east coast with 17 commercially important fish, including notoriety for being the Blue Marlin Capital of the World. The waters off the coast of Dare County provide an important foraging ground for 16 endangered species<sup>8</sup> as well as 22 documented species of cetaceans found in these mid-Atlantic waters. A notable reason for not removing the bag ban is the fact that Dare County beaches consistently have the highest number of endangered sea turtle nests in North Carolina. Plastic bags littering Dare County beaches are one more lethal stressor on these already diminished populations. Feeding studies have shown sea turtles had a strong affinity for soft, clear plastic, which supports the hypothesis that sea turtles ingest debris because it is mistaken for natural prey items, such as jellyfish.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from the negative environmental impacts of plastic bags, Dare County will most likely experience saving through litter abatement. According to the 2017 Dare County annual budget, \$6,250,320 is allotted to C&D Landfill and Sanitation.<sup>10</sup> Plastic bags are not listed as recyclable and there is currently no curbside recycling of plastic bags, therefore these items end up in local landfills. Due to the limited space of the C&D Landfill, eliminating single use plastic bag waste can help extend the lifespan of this landfill.

Alternative to plastic bags include paper and reusable bags. Paper bags can be made from 100% recycled material, unlike plastic bags which are derived from unsustainable fossil fuels. In order to mitigate the cost of paper bags, businesses that are concerned about any additional costs can charge a fee for paper bags and to encourage citizens to bring their own reusable bags.

Because of the ecological and economic impacts, potential for replacement alternatives, the abundant community concern, the Plastic Ocean Project urges you to ensure ‘An Act to Reduce Plastic and Non-recycled Paper Bag Use on North Carolina’s Outer Banks’ (SENATE BILL 1018) remains intact.

Sincerely,

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