



Testimony By: Barry Londeree  
Presented To: House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife  
In Support Of: S.113, an act relating to the prohibition of plastic carryout bags, expanded polystyrene and single-use plastic straws  
Date: April 25, 2019

Chair Sheldon and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Vermont-based supporters of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), please accept this testimony in SUPPORT of S.113. This key piece of legislation would help prevent plastic pollution by restricting the distribution of plastic bags, polystyrene food containers, and single-use plastic straws.

The millions of tons of trash discarded every year impose lethal dangers to pets and wildlife. While much of this garbage is hauled to landfills, a large amount makes its way into our neighborhoods and the natural environment. Simple alternatives, such as reusable shopping bags and biodegradable single-use bags, are available and used in many stores. Reducing single-use plastic bags is a simple and effective way to protect our environment and to save and improve the quality of life for our wildlife.

Pets and other animals can ingest or become entangled by plastic bag litter. Plastic bags are also indirect killers. Plastic bags tossed from car windows can put curious animals in the path of oncoming vehicles. This roadside garbage can have a domino effect; for example, a billowing plastic bag may attract a curious prey animal, which may be hit by a car, which then puts predators and scavengers in harm's way.

Plastic bags also wash into our rivers, lakes, streams, and oceans, where they entangle or are ingested by sea turtles, otters, seals, fish, and birds. Some ocean animals mistake the bags for food, fill their stomachs with plastics, and die of starvation. Hundreds of whales, turtles, and dolphins have been found with plastic bags in their stomachs or dead from entanglement. Perhaps the most famous case involved a pygmy sperm whale stranded off the New Jersey coast. Inky, as she was called, had 3 square feet of plastic clogging her stomach. She survived, but many do not.

The problem persists beyond the direct impact of plastic products on the environment and wildlife. Plastic bags and other plastic waste materials break down into microplastics, which present a host of problems. Microplastics cause similar ingestion problems for marine and aquatic invertebrates, including commercial species such as mussels, clams, oysters and scallops, who will fill their stomachs with tiny plastic beads.

Microplastics also absorb and concentrate pollutants, including DDT, at hundreds of times their background levels, which can bioaccumulate in small marine and aquatic life. Further, as many

microplastics are made of synthetic materials that mimic estrogen, they can disrupt reproduction and skew the sex ratio of marine and aquatic invertebrates and fish, leading to their decline.

The good news is that there is momentum to turn the tide and limit the distribution of single-use plastics. In a recent sign that the world is taking this problem more seriously, corporations and cities are taking action to reduce the impact of plastic on marine life. Companies are going plastic straw-free. In 2017, Boston became the 60<sup>th</sup> municipality in Massachusetts to pass a plastic bag ordinance; Seattle became the first major city in the U.S. to ban plastic straws and utensils in 2018, the same year Brattleboro, VT, became the first Vermont town to prohibit the use of plastic bags; and California banned single-use plastic bags statewide in a 2016 voter referendum. In 2019, even more state and local legislation has been introduced across the U.S. to limit the use of disposable plastic products.

The Vermont legislature, by enacting one of the most comprehensive plastic reduction bills in history, has the potential to protect our environment and to save and improve the quality of life for Vermont pets and wildlife. I urge you to advance S.113 out of Committee in time for consideration and passage by the General Assembly before the end of the 2019 session. Thank you for your time and the opportunity to submit testimony.

Sincerely,

Barry Londeree  
Vermont State Director  
The Humane Society of the United States



Photo credit: Christina McGuinness and NOAA

## Single-use plastics

A threat to animals and the environment

**When not discarded properly, single-use plastics** are detrimental to the environment and animals.

Plastic pollution has a direct and deadly effect on wildlife. Seabirds, sea turtles, seals and other marine mammals are killed after ingesting or becoming entangled in plastic debris. Victims include endangered wildlife like [Hawaiian monk seals](#) and [Pacific loggerhead sea turtles](#), and nearly [700](#) other marine species. [Straws and drink stirrers](#) alone accounted for 2.6% of the trash picked up on beaches in 2017. Terrestrial wildlife can be harmed as well.

**What are single-use plastics?** These are plastic items that are used once and thrown away, making their way into landfills or our waterways to become marine debris. Examples include straws and stirrers, plastic bottles, plastic beverage cups and lids, plastic bags, cutlery, plastic packaging, 6 pack soda rings, and polystyrene. Most plastics do not biodegrade, and according to [a recent report](#) authored by the US Center for International Environmental Law and others, our consumption of plastic is expected to increase exponentially in the next few decades.

One garbage truck of plastic is dumped into the ocean [every minute](#). Scientists estimate that [90% of all seabirds](#) alive today have ingested plastic during their lifetime. A [report](#) from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation in partnership with the World Economic Forum predicts that by 2050 plastic in the ocean could weigh more than its fish.

**Helium balloons** are an additional threat to the environment. They are commonly made of latex or mylar materials and when released into the environment, return to the Earth as litter. They present a danger to animals who perceive them as food when they burst or

get caught in the ribbons attached to them, hindering their ability to move around and feed. Latex balloons are [not biodegradable](#).

**The pain and suffering** caused by plastics is staggering. Plastic packaging bands are caught around the necks of curious seals and sea lions, cutting into their flesh and creating deep wounds. Sea turtles eat balloons that resemble jellyfish, their natural prey. Whales ingest plastic bags and other plastic discarded in the ocean, sometimes starving to death. Animals feed plastics to their young, unknowingly starving them.

Additionally, plastics that wash into our oceans break down into smaller microplastics and are pervasive throughout our ocean ecosystem. Because many large whales feed by filtering plankton and other small animals from ocean water, [microplastics](#) can contaminate their food chain.

**The good news** is that there is momentum to turn the tide and limit the distribution of single-use plastics. In a recent sign that the world is taking this problem more seriously, corporations and cities are taking action to reduce the impact of plastic on marine life. Companies are going plastic straw-free. In 2017, [Boston](#) became the 60<sup>th</sup> municipality in Massachusetts to pass a plastic bag ordinance; [Seattle](#) became the first major city in the U.S. to ban plastic straws and utensils in 2018; and California banned single-use plastic bags statewide in a 2016 voter referendum. In 2019, more legislation has been introduced across the U.S.

There so many alternatives to single use plastics. Let's change course and limit their use, and in turn limit the pain and suffering of wildlife we share this planet with.