ABSTRACT

TITLE:	Comparing the Life Cycle of Consumer Shopping Bags
AUTHOR(S):	Howard, Phil
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ABSTRACT: One of the symbolic steps of the environmental movement has been the banning of the plastic bag while promoting the use of another symbol of the environmental crusade, the reusable bag. Policy makers both locally and nationally feel that plastic bag bans and taxes are a step in the right direction and if accepted will pave the way for further environmental regulations. However, the banning and promotion of certain bags can create confusion and stress on the environmentally-conscious consumer. This research seeks to inform the environmentally- conscious consumer about the life cycles of shopping bags. To allow the consumer to make an informed decision, the life cycles of a conventional plastic bag, paper bag and the symbolic "Go Green" reusable bag were researched from cradle to grave. This includes the use of resources in the production process, length of use of the bag, recycling methods, landfill statistics and the total carbon foot print associated with each bag type. The life cycle information can then be used by the informed voter in regards to plastic bag bans and taxes. By comparing the three major bag types it becomes clear that each has its own environmental problems. Ultimately, what determines the environmental impact of any bag type is the amount of resources used in the production process. The best way to reduce this environmental impact is to reuse a bag as many times as possible no matter what type. This research shows that based on production alone a conventional plastic bag requires the least amount of resources and energy to produce, while paper and reusable bags require more. On the flip side, a plastic bag can take up to a thousand years to break down in the environment, which greatly increases its potential to create environmental harm. Based on the life cycles and total carbon footprints of each bag type there is little rationale in limiting their usage due to the threat of climate change. When the carbon footprints of consumer bags are compared to the carbon footprints of other current practices the bags rank trivial, meaning the carbon footprint of consumer shopping bags is low. Positive or negative this symbolic movement puts environmental issues on the public's radar and allows for other issues to gain attention.