

Biodegradable products may not be so green

By Wynne Parry, LiveScience

Once thrown out, biodegradable products – everything from trash bags and diaper liners to pens – are designed to break down relatively quickly and disappear into the natural environment. But these products may not live up to their green image, new research indicates.

“The implication is, it’s biodegradable, therefore, it’s better for the environment – and our point is: Well, not necessarily and not so fast,” said study researcher Morton Barlaz, who heads North Carolina State University’s Department of Civil, Construction, and Environmental Engineering.

These biodegradable products release a potent greenhouse gas, methane, as they break down in landfills, a problem aggravated by the relatively rapid rate at which they decompose.

Barlaz and colleagues looked at what happened when food waste, office paper, newsprint, municipal solid waste overall, and a biodegradable polymer called PHBO were buried in the average American landfill. Their modeling experiment showed that materials with higher rates of decomposition, like food waste and PHBO, ultimately emitted more methane into the atmosphere.

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