

# Opinion: Plastic bags need to go away

By Marce Gutiérrez and Nathan Weaver

Imagine that you're a sea turtle swimming off the coast of California. You see something that, to your eyes, looks like a jellyfish – a welcome sight, given your hunger. As you open your mouth, you realize, too late, that what you thought was dinner is, in fact, the remnants of a plastic bag. The plastic settles in your stomach, never to digest, telling your body that you're full. Soon, you'll starve and die.

The Legislature is considering two proposals to ban single-use plastic bags throughout California. Introduced by Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Los Angeles, and Assemblyman Marc Levine, D-San Rafael, in their respective chambers, the ban would be a major step forward in protecting our ocean. As a coastal state and nationwide leader, California can help protect sea turtles and other ocean wildlife.

All Californians have a deep connection to the beach and the ocean, including our Latino community. It's the perfect place to host a family get-together, a pickup ball game or to enjoy fishing. For some of us, the ocean plays an important part of our family's history: The same waves are crashing in our ancestral places of origin and the Golden State we call home. It is natural, then, that we all play a part in keeping the ocean healthy and vibrant. Reusable shopping bags, surprisingly enough, also recall long-standing traditions – long before single-use plastic bag bans were introduced, our grandmothers would unfailingly use their woven bags to shop in the “mercado.”

The U.N. Environmental Programme reports that each square mile of ocean contains more than 46,000 pieces of plastic litter,

varying in size from tiny flakes to bags to enormous fishing nets. It will take hundreds of years for this plastic to break down, longer if we keep adding more. In some parts of the Pacific Ocean, the mass of floating plastic already outweighs plankton 6 to 1. All of this plastic harms at least 267 species of ocean animals, and plastic bags are especially dangerous.

California could help protect the Pacific by eliminating single-use plastic bags. Assume that our state's 38 million residents each use seven plastic bags a week. That's almost 13.8 billion bags each year. Some will roam our streets like urban tumbleweeds, many will take up scarce landfill space and only a few will be recycled. But too many plastic bags will enter the ocean through storm drains, creeks and rivers.

Banning plastic bags would be a huge victory for animals throughout the Pacific, like the leatherback sea turtle. These turtles consume hundreds of jellyfish each day and can easily mistake plastic bags for their favorite food. In fact, more than one-third of adult turtles may have ingested plastic, according to a recent analysis of dissection reports. Because sea turtles cannot vomit, any plastic they can't pass will remain in their stomachs permanently. Once a turtle eats too many bags, it will have no room left for food and will die of starvation.

Researchers in Queensland, Australia, found that bags and other soft plastics caused nearly a third of all sea turtle deaths in the area studied. Leatherback turtle populations have declined by 95 percent in the last two decades, due to a combination of factors, and it is critical that we remove threats to these vulnerable animals.

Many other species would benefit from a plastic bag ban. Seabirds like the majestic Laysan albatross frequently ingest floating plastic, mistaking it for food. Other birds are trapped or entangled in bags and, once trapped, often drown or

suffocate. Adult seabirds can inadvertently scoop up plastic pieces, including bag scraps, and feed them to their chicks. When the plastic lodges in the chick's stomach, it leaves too little room for food and can starve the chick.

Even the largest animals in the ocean are potentially vulnerable to plastic bags: Scientists have found plastic in the stomachs of several dead whales in recent years. Most of the largest species of whales are filter feeders that swim through the ocean with their mouths open and capture floating plankton. This feeding strategy puts the whale at risk to suck up any piece of plastic garbage small enough to fit in its whale-sized mouth. Toothed whales are also vulnerable. Scientists have discovered plastic bags in the stomachs of dead sperm whales, which feed primarily on squid and fish.

Banning single-use plastic bags is an easy, common-sense way to protect marine animals. That's why more than 70 California cities and counties have already said "no" to single-use plastic bags. Every plastic bag ban helps keep the Pacific Ocean cleaner.

Nothing that we use for a few minutes should pollute the ocean for hundreds of years. It's time to do the right thing by banning single-use plastic bags in California.

*Marce Gutiérrez directs Azul, an organization working to empower Latinos as coastal and ocean stewards. Nathan Weaver is the oceans advocate for Environment California, a citizen-based environmental advocacy organization. This column first appeared in the Sacramento Bee.*