

I began my vigil about mid-February. Each day, when I made my trek from Minden to Kearney and back, I would strain my eyes to get a glimpse of their arrival. Then, it happened. After all these years, I still find it thrilling to witness the return of the magnificent Sandhill cranes to central Nebraska, but this article isn't about them.

Unfortunately, during my intense scrutiny of the landscape, I witnessed another sight I found extremely disturbing.

While scanning the countryside looking for cranes, I noticed innumerable, unwanted objects scattered throughout the



now barren fields. There, flapping in the breeze, were countless single-use, plastic bags and assorted remnants snagged to the stubble of the previous season's crop. On occasion, a bag would be set free by the wind only again to get caught downwind by other vegetation. The sight sickened and saddened me. All I could think of is how and why we humans have allowed this to happen. I then began thinking about the impact this disgusting garbage plays on our wildlife and environment.

What can we do to stop this appalling pollution?

When I was a child, the plastic industry was in its infancy. Back in the day, paper bags and cardboard boxes were the norm for carrying home purchases from grocery stores and other retailers. Even then, I'm sorry to say, roadside ditches and open fields could be seen littered with unwanted paper and cardboard packages. On the brighter side, that kind of pollution is bio-degradable; however, in no case does that make littering justifiable.

In the late 1960's, on the heels of the invention of the single-use plastic bag, the birth of plastic bag litter began. Today, this type of litter has created a major environmental challenge that worsens by the day. With more than a trillion plastic bags in circulation annually, the dilemma will likely become catastrophic. Every bag that ends up in the environment threatens wildlife. Research has shown that throughout the world plastic bags are responsible for suffocation deaths of wild animals. It is estimated that three-hundred million plastic bags end up in the Atlantic Ocean alone. It is not uncommon for sea life such as porpoises and sea turtles to mistakenly see a plastic bag as prey, and once ingested, the bags either cut off their airways causing deaths by suffocation or from the bags' toxicity; or intestinal blockages cause slow and agonizing deaths.

Although the plastic bag in reality is the problem, the true blame for the problem lies with us humans. It is the result of nothing more than human laziness. I share with you an example. For convenience, a plastic bag makes a perfect carry to a picnic. Once all the goodies within the bag are consumed, it is estimated that one in three consumers will simply allow the bag to be carried off by the wind adding to the litter problem.

There are those who advocate banning plastic bags altogether. In September of 2014, California became the first state in the Union to pass a bill banning single-use plastic bags. Several cities and municipalities throughout the country have similar laws on their books. Perhaps, this is something we Nebraskan's should strongly consider?

Others profess the plastic bag should be recycled. Although recycling sounds noble, studies have shown that few recycling plants actually recycle them. They are extremely difficult to recycle. Most end up in the landfill. Furthermore, whether plastic bags are buried in a landfill or end up polluting the environment—all can take hundreds of years to biodegrade.

What other solutions exist? We as consumers could refuse plastic bags and use only paper bags. Unfortunately, even paper bags take their toll on the environment through the increase use of trees for their production combined with increased energy consumption. Why not consider the reusable cloth bag? It is fast becoming a favorite among environmental supporters.

The best solution to the problem is —stop littering!