



Kudos to National Geographic for its [stunner of an issue](#) on plastics and the environmental harms they cause. As this latest report and many other recent stories make clear, we are drowning in plastics. Bits of plastic have been found in [beer](#), in major brands of [bottled water](#), in [75% of deep sea fish](#), in the [soils of the Swiss mountains](#), and at the bottom of the [deepest ocean trench on Earth](#). We make ungodly amounts of plastic each year and then toss it, mostly without care, so that it makes its way to our rivers and oceans. Even when we try to dispose of it responsibly or biodegrade it, we [largely fail](#). For the most part, we are stuck with the plastic we make for a very, very long time.

The problem is accelerating. As the NatGeo story highlights, “[p]roduction has grown at such a breakneck pace that virtually half the plastic ever manufactured has been made in the past 15 years.” Most of that production creates single-use plastic, the detritus of food wrapping and Amazon packaging and plastic goody bags containing endless kids’ party favors, most of which (I can report from kidland) are also made from throwaway plastic. “Roughly 40 percent of the now more than 448 million tons of plastic produced every year is disposable, much of it used as packaging intended to be discarded within minutes after purchase,” NatGeo notes. Polluting so much of the earth over geological timescales for such fleeting conveniences seems the definition of short-sighted.

So what should we do? A lot can be accomplished by challenging our throwaway-plastic culture, both through education and through regulation. We need to reframe how we think about plastic, to consider it an incredibly useful commodity that should be much more rarely and carefully deployed. Any American who has shopped at a western European grocery store and stood waiting, futilely, for free plastic grocery bags at the end of the checkout line knows that cultural norms are powerful (and knows to bring a bag next time). Some cities and counties in the U.S. are making that transformation too, including L.A., which banned

free plastic grocery bags a while back [to pretty good effect](#). San Francisco and other jurisdictions are also considering banning throwaway plastic straws, or making them unlawful to hand out except at a customer's specific request. These are small steps but important ones, useful both for waste reduction and education. We talked about initiatives like these, and other useful ideas a bit grander in scale, in a [UCLA Emmett analysis](#) a few years back on plastics in the oceans. Unfortunately it remains relevant reading. I'm looking forward to seeing more good ideas put into practice as stories like NatGeo's get more attention.

p.s. obligatory reference to The Graduate here. Plastics are our (regulatory) future!