

It's multiplying

by Mia MacDonald - Brighter Green

I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling besieged by plastic. Over the past few years especially, it seems like it's hard to buy electronics, a sandwich or books from Amazon.com without getting a load of hard or soft curbside unrecyclable junk. Even most healthy restaurants pack take out food in plastic containers now; paper boxes have disappeared. Because of this, I rarely get food to go and yet I, too, have bags full of plastic containers that I can't bring myself to throw out. Some are holding papers, beads, stamps and earrings. But there's so much. I can't find productive uses for all of it. (I brought an enormous plastic box, complete with hotel logo, home from Las Vegas. My sandwich has been inside it precisely ten seconds before the container would be rendered obsolete. It's still waiting for an assignment.) When, I wondered, did plastic become *de rigueur* for almost any transaction?

I had confirmation of my fears. We *are* drowning in plastic. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's **2007 Statistical Abstract**, each American produces 4.4 pounds of solid waste every day. That's up from 3.7 pounds (already astonishingly high) in 1980. We're well on our way to creating a ton of solid waste each, each and every year. Think of how comparatively light all the plastic packaging is—and the volume of just a few ounces of it, let alone a pound or so. The Census Bureau also found that each of us drank 23 *gallons* of bottled water in 2004, 10 times as much as 1980. Nearly all of that reaches our lips via single use plastic bottles. No wonder the landfills are bulging, the incinerators straining, and our closets or garbage pails groaning under the weight of all that plastic. This time of year plastic seems omnipresent. While this is not exactly a holiday season-themed thought, it does tie into the theme of New Year: plastic has a very, very long life.

It can also travel very far. I heard a story on NYC's **Leonard Lopate Show** of how far and wide 28,800 plastic animals (ducks, frogs and others) ended up after spilling from a freighter in the



This scene is familiar to many who visit Africa cities

north Pacific in 1992. Many ended up on the floor of the ocean, others in Alaskan waterways. Donovan Hohn, the interviewee, said we use 200 million million tons of plastic a year. When I was on the northern coast of Kenya several years ago, I learned that plastic flip flops could end up in a remote marine reserve from as far away as Malaysia, carried on ocean currents. A film, **Flip Flotsam**, was made about the phenomenon. Local women carve and fashion the long-travelling flip flops into key chains, mobiles and jewelry. They're beautiful...but they can't stem the plastic tide. Like the water bottles, the packaging and the rubber ducks for our baths, the plastic flip flops keep showing up in their multitudes.

Wangari Maathai, Nobel peace laureate (and **Lantern author**) has been waging a campaign in Kenya to get the government to ban thin plastics, especially those ubiquitous flimsy bags, and to get consumers to use "eco-friendly" carrying devices like baskets made from grasses. The effort is taking off, and not a moment too soon. It's sad but true that even here in the Maasai Mara ecosystem, one of the world's great wildernesses, plastic bags are around. Inside the Maasai Mara reserve it's rare to see anything other than biological material—thick grasses, trees, shrubs and of course an amazing number of animals and birds. But outside the reserve it's a different story. On the drive here from Narok, the honky-tonk town that is the gateway to the Mara, near every town and village a thousand (or so) plastic bags seemed to bloom.

In bushes, in the grasses, in trees. Mostly clear, but also the occasional blue-green variety. It's depressing to see, as it must be depressing to live around. So why do people toss the bags into their environment? It's hard to know, which means it may be hard to stop. Yet nearly everyone would agree that the bags are a nuisance. And an unsightly and unhealthy one at that (they can lodge in the stomachs of domestic and wild animals and serve as a petri dish for malaria-carrying mosquitoes). So why do these bags continue to bedevil us and the landscape? They're

cheap, they're everywhere, and even though they're a relatively new invention, they have become a staple of everyday life, even here in a remote region of Kenya. And their manufacturers want to keep churning them out. After all, there's money to be made. Kenyan industrialists cite the jobs created by creating all of those plastic bags.

Of course, the calculus is false: they're costing an arm and a leg and more. I hope San Francisco and Ireland and Dhaka, Bangladesh can withstand the caterwauling of the bag manufacturers so their bans and taxes on the flimsy nuisances hold up. Then, on my or your next visit to the Mara, perhaps Kenya will have done the same—and the most infinite variety of species to greet you on your way in won't be those made of petrochemicals and oil.