

suffocate inside plastic grocery bags.

And, of course, many sea creatures—like the pilot whale—eat plastic. In the ocean, sunlight, waves, and heat often break down plastic into pieces tinier than a pinkie fingernail. Those bits, called microplastics, become coated with **algae** over time. That makes them smell like food to many animals.

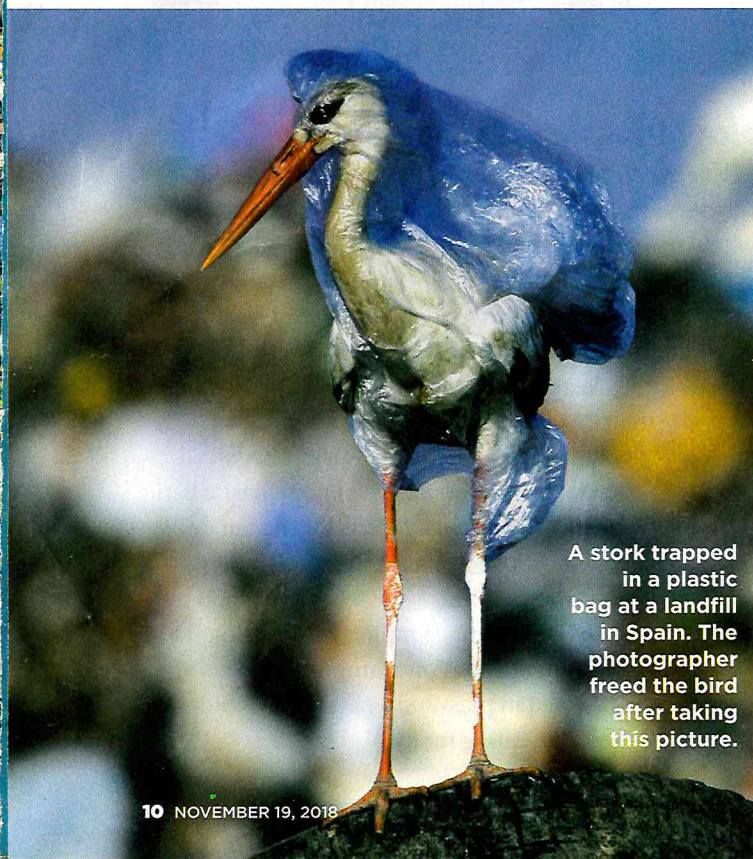
Some sea creatures are fooled into thinking microplastics are real food. They stuff themselves with it, to the point that they don't have room in their stomachs for any actual food. They die from starvation as a result.

Eating plastic hurts animals in other ways too. The toxins in the plastic can seriously affect their behavior and digestion, and the **ecosystem** as a whole, says Matthew Savoca. He is a scientist who studies the effects of plastic on marine life.

"It affects not just the individual animals that eat plastic, but the animals that eat those animals," he says.

Putting Plastic in Its Place

Many people are trying to help solve the world's plastic crisis. In the United States, for example, plastic grocery bags are now banned or taxed in some cities, including Seattle and Washington, D.C. And there is a nationwide movement to encourage people to



A stork trapped in a plastic bag at a landfill in Spain. The photographer freed the bird after taking this picture.

What You Can Do

Experts say the key to solving our plastic waste crisis is to simply use less of the stuff in the first place. Here are some easy ways to do that.

SAY NO TO STRAWS

Americans throw out 500 million plastic straws every day. Opt for paper or reusable metal straws—or skip them altogether.

DRINK SMARTER

Nearly 1 million plastic beverage bottles are sold every minute around the world. Sip from a reusable drinking bottle instead.

PASS ON PLASTIC BAGS

Take reusable shopping bags with you to the store. You'll help cut down on the 1 trillion plastic bags that are used around the world each year.

PAY ATTENTION TO PACKAGING

Encourage your parents to buy products such as bar soap and boxed laundry detergent instead of versions of those items that come in plastic bottles.

stop using so many plastic drinking straws. Some countries are taking even bolder steps (see "How Countries Are Cutting Down on Plastic," p. 11).

Global companies including Starbucks and Hilton Hotels recently announced plans to reduce or eliminate their use of plastic straws. And earlier this year, Alaska Airlines switched from plastic stirrers to paper ones on its flights, thanks in part to one teen's letter (see sidebar, p. 9).

What's more, last December the U.S. and 192 other countries passed the United Nations Clean Seas agreement. The pact is a formal declaration of those countries' intent to stop polluting the oceans with plastic waste.

Experts say such steps are promising—as long as the efforts ultimately include funding and the manpower to help developing countries manage their plastic trash.

"We need to develop waste-collection systems around the world that are capable of managing the waste that is being generated," Siegler says. "That's really the key issue."

Individuals also have an important role to play (see "What You Can Do," p. 10). Experts advise focusing on