

Plastic waste

Ethical dilemma in the bag

Jon Entine asks if plastic bags are really the problem they are made out to be

Mexico City banned stores from giving out plastic bags this summer. That follows a decision by the Chinese last year to ban the free distribution of ultra-thin plastic bags, which they call “white pollution”.

Corporations are following suit. After first instituting a charge for plastic bags, Ikea ditched them completely. Wal-Mart has launched its latest sustainability effort, dumping their use in Brazil. It is participating in a television ad campaign featuring a slogan “saco e um saco”, which translates as either “a bag is a pain in the butt” or “a bag sucks”.

A top official for the UN Environment Programme has called for a global ban on plastic bags. “There is simply zero justification for manufacturing them any more, anywhere,” says Achim Steiner, executive director of UNEP.

It is estimated the world now consumes 500bn plastic bags annually. They’ve come to symbolise consumerist culture: they are littered everywhere; they are made of petrochemicals; they are disposed of in landfills; children can swallow them; and they can kill marine life.

Hold on. Reducing waste is a good thing. But the real question is: in the zeal to demonise plastic bags, are we trading one ecological problem for another? Does this campaign make environmental sense?

The UN’s aggressive new stance, which grew out of an April 2009 study from UNEP – Marine Litter: A Global Challenge – is a case in point. “Litter, such as thin-film plastic bags, which chokes marine life, should be banned or phased out rapidly everywhere,” the report concludes.

But the dangers of plastic bags are not so clear. Claims by advocacy groups such as reusablebags.com, which blames them for the yearly

deaths of “100,000 sea turtles and other marine animals [who] mistake them for food”, are just plain hokum.

“It’s very unlikely that many animals are killed by plastic bags,” says Greenpeace’s top marine biologist, David Santillo.

Reusable shopping bags, the environmentally preferable solution, just are not feasible for most shoppers, who are not about to carry around a dozen tote bags each time they visit the local Kroger or Carrefour. The choice really comes down to plastic or paper, and the ecological winner is not so clear.

Life-cycle analysis leans towards plastic. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, it takes 70% less energy to produce a plastic bag than a paper one, and plastic bags take 91% less energy to recycle. Paper is produced from trees, which requires extracting timber and processing it. Plastic bags are of course produced from oil, with its own set of environmental consequences.

Both paper and plastic bags have to be transported. It takes about seven trucks to transport the same number of paper bags as can be transported by a single truck full of plastic bags.

Landfill reality

And what happens in landfills, where most bags, paper and plastic, end up? Although plastics do not biodegrade, modern waste pits are designed so nothing biodegrades, because the refuse is isolated from air and water in order to prevent groundwater and air pollution.

Environmentalists promote biodegradable plastic bags, including some made from cornstarch, which are “totally degradable”, decomposing into carbon dioxide and water. But they don’t degrade if they



A pound of spinach and a dead sea turtle?

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are locked in landfills rather than placed in specialised composting bins. And the additives contained in biodegradable plastics may pollute water supplies. Reality is messy.

Plastic bags may offer further advantages if the new technologies allowing them to be recycled continue to advance. Recycling rates for plastic bags exceed 30% in some Asian and European countries, notably Germany.

Although bans have been initiated in a few US cities, such as Malibu and San Francisco, most people in the US view the issue with indifference. Baltimore backed out on charging for bags earlier this year, and a ban in Philadelphia was rescinded. Voters in Seattle, one of America’s most liberal cities, soundly rejected a bag tax. But indifference is not just a US thing. The heralded ban in China is being ignored by as many as 80% of stores, particularly in rural areas, according to a recent survey.

Reasonable people do not buy the hype that plastic bags are the evil they are made out to be, and clear-thinking environmentalists do not see paper bags as a panacea. “It depends on what environmental issues you see as being more important,” says Lisa Mastny, at the Worldwatch Institute. “The things you can see in your daily life tend to create more of an emotional response than the things that are in the background.” ■



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