

# Critics Move to Eliminate Environmental Nuisance: The Plastic Bag

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By Joan Lowy, Scripps Howard News Service, Pittsburgh Post Gazette

Imagine a world without plastic shopping bags. It could be the future.

There is a growing international movement to ban or discourage the use of plastic bags because of their environmental effects. Countries from Ireland to Australia are cracking down on the bags and action is beginning to stir in the United States.

The ubiquitous plastic shopping bag, so handy for everything from toting groceries to disposing of doggie doo, may be a victim of its own success. Although plastic bags didn't come into widespread use until the early 1980s, environmental groups estimate that 500 billion to 1 trillion of the bags are now used worldwide every year.

Critics of the bags say they use up natural resources, consume energy to manufacture, create litter, choke marine life and add to landfill waste.

"Every time we use a new plastic bag they go and get more petroleum from the Middle East and bring it over in tankers," said Stephanie Barger, executive director of Earth Resource Foundation in Costa Mesa, Calif. **"We are extracting and destroying the Earth to use a plastic bag for 10 minutes."**

The foundation is calling for a 25-cent tax on plastic bags in California.

A bill that would have imposed a 3-cent tax on plastic shopping bags and cups was sidelined in the California Legislature last year after heavy opposition from the retail and plastics industries.

The plastics industry took a "proactive stance" by working with retailers to encourage greater recycling, rather than "putting on taxes to address the problem," said Donna Dempsey, executive director of the Film and Bag Federation, a trade association for the plastic bag industry.

The tax proposals are loosely modeled on Ireland's "PlasTax," a levy of about 20 cents that retail customers have had to pay for each plastic bag since March 2002. **The use of plastic bags in Ireland dropped over 90 percent following imposition of the tax and the government has raised millions of dollars for recycling programs.**

Similar legislation was introduced in Scotland last month and is being discussed for the rest of the United Kingdom. Consumers seem agreeable to giving up the bags, said Claire Wilton, senior waste campaigner at Greenpeace-UK.

"There certainly hasn't been an angry uprising of shoppers [in Ireland] saying we want our bags for free," Wilton said. "I think a lot of people recognize they are wasteful. That's why they try to save them to use again, although they often forget to bring them with them when they shop."

In Australia, about 90 percent of retailers have signed up with the government's voluntary program to reduce plastic bag use. A law that went into effect last year in Taiwan requires restaurants, supermarkets and convenience stores to charge customers for plastic bags and utensils. It has resulted in a 69 percent drop in use of plastic products, according to news reports.

One of the key concerns is litter. In China, plastic bags blowing around the streets are called "white pollution." In South Africa, the bags are so prominent in the countryside that they have won the derisive title of "national flower."

The plastics industry says the solution to bag litter is to change people, not the product. "Every piece of litter has a human face behind it. If they are a harm to the environment in terms of visual blight, then people need to stop littering," said Rob Krebs, a spokesman for the American Plastics Council.

One of the most dramatic impacts is on marine life. **About 100,000 whales, seals, turtles and other marine animals are killed by plastic bags each year worldwide**, according to Planet Ark, an international environmental group.

Last September, more than 354,000 bags -- most of them plastic -- were collected during an international cleanup of coastal areas in the United States and 100 other countries, according to the Ocean Conservancy. The bags were the fifth most common item of debris found on beaches.