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Event hopes to inform SB about plastic bags

By ERIC LINDBERG — Dec. 19, 2008

Plastic bags are the newest endangered species in Santa Barbara.

At least that's what organizers of yesterday's "Day Without a Bag" event hope.

Jean-Michel Cousteau and members of his Ocean Futures Society joined local nonprofit environmental groups to hand out thousands of reusable bags to citizens in an effort to spread the word about the negative impact of their single-use counterparts.

"Hopefully this country can lead the way for the rest of the planet," Cousteau said.

Joining the longtime steward of the world's oceans were two women referred to frequently throughout the event as "bag ladies" and "bag monsters."

Covered from head to toe in 700 plastic bags each — representing the average amount used by one person in one year — the women held signs reading "Which way to the ocean?" and shouted phrases such as "Don't kill our family!"

The tongue-in-cheek display drew stares from people passing City Hall and even tempted a few to stop and pick up a free reusable bag. Environmental leaders at the event said simply spreading awareness about the impacts of plastic bags is a step in the right direction.

"I think it hasn't risen to the top of the consciousness like, say, leaving your water running," said Hillary Hauser, executive director of locally based Heal the Ocean.

Concerns about sea animals mistaking pieces of Styrofoam and plastic for plankton, or birds getting chunks of plastic caught in their throats, hasn't impacted the masses in a serious way, she said.

Hauser advocated for more educational outreach and community events such as "Day Without a Bag" to raise the level of awareness.

Others, such as Kira Redmond, said a legislative approach would be necessary to stem the tide of plastic bags.

"I think the key is going to be the regulatory side," the executive director of Santa Barbara Channelkeeper said. "...Fees are really the best way to do it."

Ireland introduced a tax on plastic bags years ago, she said, and has seen a drastic drop in their use. If stores charge a fee to take plastic bags, Redmond said shoppers would be more likely to remember to bring a reusable bag.

Santa Barbara city leaders have been looking into a possible ban or fee strategy to curtail the use of plastic bags and other products such as Styrofoam.

Mayor Marty Blum said difficulties with state law, as well as with finding inexpensive compostable takeout containers, is holding up the process.

"When we have the regulators in the State Legislature doing the opposite, it's hard for local governments to change things," she said.

The mayor described how state law prohibits local municipalities from placing a fee on plastic bags, legislation she attributed to grocery store and plastic bag lobbyists.

As far as getting people to opt for reusable bags, Mayor Blum said people simply have to make a point to bring a bag with them when they go to the store.

"It's a matter of habit, I think," she said.

Efforts to spread that message are ongoing, particularly with local youth. Mark A. Brzezinski, deputy director and professor at UC Santa Barbara's Marine Science Institute, said approximately 40,000 kids between kindergarten and high school visit the institute annually.

While not an expert on ocean pollution, he shares his experience from research trips at sea with those who visit.

"Compared to a pristine environment, it's pretty contaminated," Brzezinski said.

Midway between Hawaii and California, he spotted a piece of plastic every several hundred yards, he said, and those were only the pieces he could see from the deck.

Smaller pieces cause just as much trouble — being mistaken for plankton — as do large pieces, which tend to resemble jellyfish, he said.

Ultimately, Cousteau said it will be up to the nation's youth to create change when it comes to plastic bag use. He has faith that educational efforts will prevail.

"Hopefully that will generate a movement that will lead a whole lot of kids to educate their parents," he said.

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Victor Maccharoli- Jean Michel Cousteau stands with two "bag monsters" at "A Day Without a Bag" event Thursday at Santa Barbara City Hall. His Ocean Futures Society hosted the statewide event.



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