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Plastic? Bag It

More and more, shoppers are turning to reusable sacks

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 The Register-Guard

Posted to Web: Sunday, Apr 19, 2009 06:17 PM
 Appeared in print: Monday, Apr 20, 2009, page D2

With the 39th annual Earth Day celebration coming up Wednesday, it's easy to name the big policy issues that confront the globe — climate change, famine, water shortage, species extinction, depletion of natural resources — and feel paralyzed by the enormity of these scientifically and politically complex problems.

But there's one environmental issue, at least, that all the ordinary people in the world can come together to solve (and one in which many areas of the Third World are far ahead of us here in the United States).

That's putting the kibosh on the use of billions of plastic and paper shopping bags that at best end up stuffing landfills and at worst create horrendous environmental damage.

The Woodwatch Institute, an environmental research organization in Washington, D.C., estimates that people in this country throw away as many as 100 billion plastic grocery bags each year. That number of bags required 12 million barrels of oil to produce. And many of them end up clogging municipal water drains and taking up an amazing amount of space in landfills.

The institute says that only about 1 percent of the bags used for carrying groceries and other purchases home from the store end up being recycled.

It apparently takes less energy and water to produce these plastic bags than it does paper ones, but that just means we have double the problem.

Fortunately, it's one that can be solved easily at the grass-roots level, if people just stop using them.

There are great — and attractive — alternatives. The fanciest ones can cost some money upfront, of course, but there are many others that are either cheap or cost nothing at all, because they involve turning surplus household items such as old T-shirts into funky carryalls.

When it comes to "reduce, reuse, recycle," the mantra of the environmentally conscious, the sky's the limit.

Sarah Grimm, waste reduction specialist for Lane County's Waste Management Division, said the county decided months ago to try to combine increasing public awareness of the need for waste prevention with a fundraiser to help provide food for needy families through FOOD for Lane County.

"We ordered 5,000 'chico bags' — it's a stuff sack about the size of a fist that opens up into a shopping bag — and we sell them for \$3 apiece at each of the county's 16 transfer stations," Grimm said. "They're black, and they have the county logo printed on them in blue, they're really neat, and they're perfect for groceries."

So far, sale of the bags has allowed the county to donate \$2,000 to the local food bank, "and we still have a lot left — we'd love to sell a bunch more," she said. "We estimate that if we sold all 5,000 of our bags and they were used consistently by people, we would eliminate the need for as many as 1 million (disposable) bags per year."

No one seems to track the trend away from "paper-or-plastic" to cloth or other reusable alternatives. But Rex Snelstrom, store manager at Capella Market in south Eugene, says customers definitely have gotten into the groove. Capella has never offered plastic bags as an alternative, but it does have paper.

"I don't have a percentage, but we do know that our business is growing steadily while the volume of bags we're purchasing continues to go down," Snelstrom said. "It's just excellent."

The ingenuity of Capella's customers "runs across the board" in reducing shopping bag waste, he said.

"We see everything from the reuse of plastic and paper grocery bags from other stores to cloth and homemade bags. People are being very creative out there."

Several other local grocery chains, including Trader Joe's and Eugene-based Market of Choice, also no longer offer plastic bags.

Like Capella, Market of Choice gives a 5-cent rebate for each bag brought in by customers and reused. Trader Joe's customers who bring their own bags get their name in a monthly drawing for a gift card at the store.

Plastic bags can be worse than simple litter.

They often end up in streams and rivers and eventually wash into the oceans. They kill thousands of marine animals and birds that become tangled in them or mistake them as food.

Even when the bags disintegrate with time into tiny particles, the toxic bits can be ingested by sea life. That causes dangerous chemicals to build up in their systems, and those chemicals are passed up the food chain.

While U.S. shoppers may be getting the message about the environmental perils of plastic bags, they're way behind consumers in many other parts of the globe.

One of the best Internet sites on the subject is reusablebags.com, which catalogs worldwide progress on the issue.

For instance, on the African continent, the nation of South Africa began charging a "bag tax" for disposable plastic bags six years ago. Kenya has banned plastic grocery bags since 2005 and also charges a fee for use of other plastic bags.

Two years ago, Tanzania prohibited the use of all plastic bags.

In Asia, Bangladesh banned all polyethylene bags in Dhaka, the capital city, in 2003, because they had clogged the drainage system a decade ago, causing severe flooding that inundated two-thirds of the nation.

Two years later, the country has rejuvenated its jute industry. Jute is a plant-based fiber used in making sacks.

In 2008, several years after declaring the discarded bags "white pollution," China banned the manufacture and use of ultra-thin plastic bags and prohibited merchants from giving away the bags to consumers for their purchases.

The zeal for abandoning thin plastic bags led first to the popularity of cloth bags, many bearing the name of local merchants, then to a second generation of reusable but much cheaper bags.

Reusablebags.com cautions that consumers should ask a few questions before they make the switch from the more expensive but durable bags to their knockoffs.

Where and how are the bags being made? Are they "fair trade" items, meaning that the workers who produce them receive a living wage and a decent working environment?

Will the bag last, or will it break after a few uses and itself become a clog in the waste stream?

Does it make sense to have a drawer full of cheap bags that take up space and end up getting thrown in the trash later, or a few attractive, high-quality favorites that you really like and really use?

“The volume of (disposable) bags we're purchasing continues to go down.”

— REX SNELOSTROM, CAPELLA MARKET MANAGER



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