

# Ban the Bag

## The current status of plastic bags in Victoria

By Michael Salt with contributions by Joanna Drennan and Robert Skehan

We are constantly warned about the danger of plastic to our health and to the environment, yet plastic bags have become an accessory of modern life. Due to their long lifetime and people's laissez-faire attitude to their use and disposal, plastic bags are creating havoc to the earth's eco-system. We've all seen the horrible photos of turtles choking on plastic bags or ocean vortices full of plastic, so why is our behaviour still largely unchanged?

## The plastic bag problem

The most recent survey calculated that Australians use 4 Billion lightweight single use HDPE bags every year<sup>1</sup>. That's over 10 million a day! Around 75% of these were from supermarkets, while other retailers such as fast food restaurants, service stations, convenience stores and other shops made up the rest. There are two major types of limited-use plastic bags: High Density Polyethylene (HDPE) and Low Density Polyethylene (LDPE). HDPE is used in the lightweight plastic bags found in supermarkets, while LDPE form the heavier department store bags. Each plastic bag is then used on average for around 12 minutes, yet may take up to one thousand years to breakdown<sup>2</sup>. It's time we reflected a little longer before mindlessly grabbing another plastic bag.

Both HDPE and LDPE plastic bags are actually recyclable, they can be recycled into useful products. This is being carried out by innovators such as Replas, who are producing park benches, fencing and fitness equipment with the recovered plastic<sup>3</sup>. Recycling plastic bags, however, is not the norm. Once in consumer hands, plastic bags usually face one of three possible fates:

1. **DUMPED** - It is thrown into the bin, or used as the bin, and ends up as general landfill waste.
2. **LITTER** - It never makes it to the bin, ending up as litter on streets, parks and waterways.
3. **IMPROPER RECYCLING** - It is incorrectly placed in the curbside recycling system, and ends up causing issues with machinery and sorting process at recycling depots

Large numbers of plastic bags, unfortunately, do end up in our rivers, lining the ocean floors and choking wildlife. Planet Ark estimates that 80 million plastic bags end up in our streets, parks and beaches. Once in the waterways, turtles, whales and seabirds mistake these bags for food or become entangled in them, resulting in injuries and death. Globally, it is estimated that plastic bags kill at least 100,000 birds, whales, seals and turtles every year<sup>4</sup>.

## Government intervention

In 2008, Victoria conducted a trial of a 10 cent levy on bags, which produced a 79% reduction in plastic bag usage<sup>5</sup>. The funds raised were directed to key environmental projects. Deplorably, the Victorian government chose not to expand the trial, as they believed the costs outweighed the benefits. Their economic analysis, this decision failed to take into consideration the incalculable social

and environmental benefits of reducing plastic bag pollution. Some hope could be drawn from the southern state's statement that they intended in the future to discuss the issue of plastic bag usage with the ACT, NT and Tasmania.

Seven years have passed in Victoria, and we've seen the population grow by around one million people. We've seen three different premiers, yet no action has been taken to reduce the flow of plastic bags.

In stark contrast, South Australia has shown national leadership on the issue by introducing a ban on lightweight HDPE bags in 2009. Since the ban, it is estimated that more than nine out of 10 shoppers take their own bag to the supermarket, resulting in a whopping 400 million less bags in South Australia annually<sup>6</sup>. Tasmania, the Northern Territory and ACT have also all taken action on the issue and introduced legislation to ban lightweight plastic bags.

"It's high time that the rest of the State governments followed the leadership of SA, NT, ACT and now Tasmania by introducing a ban on single use singlet style plastic bags, and supporting other common sense environmentally friendly policies such as a system for bottle and can refunds," Clean Up Australia Chairman Ian Kiernan AO

## Community-led action

In the absence of national or state leadership on the issue, community groups and concerned citizens are taking action. There are now many community-led bans being promoted throughout Australia. The beachside town of Torquay in Victoria has guided citizens away from relying on plastic bags by placing reminders in shopping centre carparks, educating retailers, and working with those retailers to provide alternatives to single use plastic bags. One example is the popular Boomerang Bags Boxes that allow shoppers to simply borrow reusable bags if they did not bring their own. On their next trip to the shops the borrowed bags are returned to the Boomerang Bags Box for others to borrow. A number of shops, including IGA Supermarket, in Torquay have taken advantage of this system to reduce the number of plastic bags they hand out to their customers and the feedback has been excellent with shop owners also reporting a reduction in costs through this initiative.

Boomerang Bags Boxes have significant community engagement with the boxes being made by Torquay Community Men's Shed from recycled fence palings, and the reusable bags handcrafted by volunteers at Spring Creek Community House from recycled curtain material. Plastic Bag Free Torquay estimates that in 2015 there has been an increase of about 60% in the number of people shopping with reusable bags which has greatly reduced the number of single use plastic bags littering the streets, beaches and waterways of Torquay by up to 400,000 bags.

## What can you do to help?

Every Australian should take responsibility for this issue. I advocate applying the Avoid, Reduce, Reuse and Recycle principle for sustainability to your behaviours towards plastic bags:

- I. Avoid - Say "no" to taking a bag at the checkout, by carrying your own reusable fabric or green bag when you go shopping. Keep a couple of spares in your car or handbag so you're always

ready. Start shopping at stores who promote use of containers, jars or paper as alternatives to plastic bags.

- II. Reduce - If you must take a plastic bag, try to minimise the number you use by filling bags to their maximum capacity. Encourage friends and family to reduce their usage too.
- III. Reuse - If you do become a closet owner of a plastic bag, make sure you reuse for a purpose that requires a plastic bag. Take it back to the shops to transport your groceries or to collect your fruit and vegies.
- IV. Recycle - Once you've done everything you can do with the plastic bag, take them to a supermarket where they are collected for recycling. Some Australian supermarkets offer a plastic bag recycling collection at the front of the store (to find your nearest centre visit - '[RecyclingNearYou.com.au](http://RecyclingNearYou.com.au)'). **Do not put them in your curbside recycling as they wreak havoc with machinery at the recycling depot, and end up in the wrong place!!!**

Clean Up Australia offers resources to small businesses to help guide them to become plastic bag free - [www.noplasticbags.org.au](http://www.noplasticbags.org.au)

## Ready to do more?

If you are moved by the issue and motivated to do more, there are a number of advocacy groups which have formed in the laggard states to bring about change. These groups are calling for state government action through petitions. Find the relevant petition in your state, sign and share with friends. If you live in Queensland, NSW or Victoria you can find your Plastic Bag Free campaign by searching Facebook or the web for *Plastic Bag Free (Your state)*.

<https://www.facebook.com/PlasticBagFreeQLD/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/PlasticBagFreeNSW/>  
<https://plasticbagfreensw.squarespace.com/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/PlasticBagFreeVictoria/>  
<http://www.plasticbagfreevictoria.org/>

Plastic bags have a huge impact on the environment and wildlife. In the face of failing government leadership, local communities are taking action to drive change. As caring citizens, all of us can do more to bring about change for the good of the planet. We can avoid using plastic bags, start recycling properly, and join the community-led action by signing the petition in your state.

### REFERENCES:

1. [www.environment.gov.au/settlements/waste/plastic-bags/index.html](http://www.environment.gov.au/settlements/waste/plastic-bags/index.html)
2. Clean Up Australia 2015 , 'Report on actions to reduce circulation of single-use plastic bags around the world: August 2014 - [http://www.cleanup.org.au/PDF/au/cua\\_plastic\\_bag\\_usage\\_around\\_world\\_august-2015.pdf](http://www.cleanup.org.au/PDF/au/cua_plastic_bag_usage_around_world_august-2015.pdf)
3. <http://charityspam.com/2015/05/27/turn-your-plastic-bags-into-a-park-bench/>
4. <http://plasticbags.planetark.org/go-plastic-bag-free>
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