

# Benefits of plastic bag ban outweigh inconvenience

THE Selangor government's ban on polystyrene food packaging and free plastic bags has been in force and the objections to the ban to date are as follows:

(i) Having to buy reusable bags and containers or pay for plastic grocery bags is a financial burden on consumers;

(ii) Consumers end up having to buy plastic bags for trash;

(iii) The ban will not reduce waste or pollution; and

(iv) plastic bags can be safely and cheaply recycled or incinerated, thus there is no need to ban or restrict their use.

In response to the above arguments, it is pointed out as follows:

Reusable cotton and canvas bags, and washable food and beverage containers can last for years and over hundreds of uses. Therefore, investing in good quality reusable items is better for human and environmental health, and makes economic sense in the long run. The only reason "free-of-charge" plastic bags and polystyrene packaging appear affordable to the average citizen is because they are not aware of the cradle-to-grave environmental and economic costs of plastic waste.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency reports between 550 billion and a trillion plastic bags are used worldwide each year and most of it end up in our oceans.

Worldwatch Institute reports at least 267 species of marine wildlife are known to have suffered or died from entanglement or ingestion of plastic marine debris. A European Commission study on the impact of litter on North Sea wildlife found over 90 per cent of birds examined had plastic in their stomachs.

If consumers had to bear the cost of rescuing and rehabilitating wildlife, mitigating and repairing damage caused by flash floods and clogged waterways and cleaning up plastic litter, plastic packaging would not be free or inexpensive at all.

The reason states and nations have had to impose bans or taxes on disposable plastics is to encourage and expedite behaviour

change, which would not take place on its own with sufficient effectiveness if we were to rely on voluntary plastic bag reductions. Governments, retailers and environmental organisations have spent millions on outreach and awareness campaigns with only minimal results.

Education and awareness campaigns have little positive impact on an informed but apathetic population, and as such, different strategies are needed. Bans and fees for plastic bags are the catalyst for consumers to reduce their plastic bag usage.

The most common argument of consumers who claim to "need" free plastic bags is that they need the bags to dispose of household rubbish in, and would now have to pay for rubbish bags. However, most of the plastic bags given out by retailers and vendors are lightweight, single-use plastic bags that are almost never reused.

To resolve the problem, the authorities should implement a policy allowing only the distribution of plastic bags above 20 micron (0.02 mm) in thickness and with a minimum capacity of five litres, and to charge consumers for it, to ensure the plastic bags are reused for storage or waste disposal.

Unfortunately, the regulations and policies currently in place seem to mostly encourage the replacement of plastic bags with paper bags, purportedly "biodegradable" bags and cheap non-woven shopping bags. None of these are environmentally sustainable alternatives.

Paper bags have a high carbon and water footprint, as more water and energy are used in the production of paper bags compared to plastic bags. However, as they are less harmful to wildlife and less toxic to human health, they can be safely used as food packaging.

Considering their high water and energy use and low durability, the use of paper bags should be restricted to the sale and serving of food, and not as grocery bags and shopping carrier bags.

Non-woven shopping bags, referred to colloquially as "recycle bags" although this is grammatically and factually inaccurate, are made of polypropylene and are, therefore, also plastic although they look and feel like fabric. These should be avoided as they are not durable, break down into plastic fibres easily, and cannot be repaired, recycled or composted. Tests by consumer groups also found a large percentage of these bags contain lead.

It is thus reiterated paper bags, non-woven reusable shopping bags and most brands of "biodegradable" plastic bags do not reduce waste or harm the environment. The solution to the problem of plastic pollution and waste reduction should incorporate the ban of small, lightweight plastic bags, the distribution only of larger, thicker plastic bags for a small fee, the elimination of "greenwashing"

alternatives such as non-woven polypropylene bags, the restriction of the use of paper bags only to food vendors and the implementation of incentives such as rebates and express checkout counters.

Long-term solutions include practical initiatives to encourage and increase recycling and composting to reduce household waste and correspondingly reduce the need for rubbish bags.

It costs more to recycle a bag than to produce a new one, and as such less than one per cent is actually recycled. As polystyrene and plastics are still made from petroleum, a non-renewable and heavily polluting resource, one should seriously question the flippant claim plastics and polystyrene products could be safely and cheaply incinerated.

Plastic waste reduction measures should not be seen as a burden or sacrifice, but merely an adjustment.



Shirley Chan, 74, and her daughter Aeda, 42, pay for plastic bags following their grocery shopping at a supermarket in Selayang. The writer says there are environmental, societal and health benefits in the reduction of plastic usage.