

Don't rubbish plastic ban

THE Selangor government's ban on polystyrene food packaging and free plastic bags has been in force for over a week and objections have been raised as follows:

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

(ii) Consumers have to buy plastic rubbish bags for waste disposal.

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

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

In response to the above arguments, it needs to be pointed that:

(i) 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 long term economic sense.

The only reason "free-of-charge" plastic bags and polystyrene packaging appear affordable to the average citizen is that they are not aware of the cradle-to-grave environmental and economic costs of plastic waste.

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

Worldwatch Institute reports that 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 that over 90% of the 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. (Picture shows a sea of garbage under Kota Kinabalu's Sembulan Lama water houses).

The reason that states and nations have had to impose bans or taxes on disposable plastics is to encourage and expedite behaviour change, which would not occur

sufficiently were we to rely on voluntary plastic bag reduction.

Governments, retailers and environmental organisations have spent millions on outreach and awareness campaigns with little positive impact on an informed but

apathetic population. Bans and fees for plastic bags are the catalyst for consumers to reduce their plastic bag usage.

(ii) Consumers commonly argue that they need the free plastic bags for their household rubbish.

However, most of the plastic bags given out by retailers and vendors are lightweight, single-use plastic bags that are almost never reused. To solve this problem, the authorities should implement a policy allowing only the distribution of plastic bags above 20 micron (0.02mm) in thickness and with a minimum capacity of five litres, and to charge consumers for them to ensure that these plastic bags are reused for storage or waste disposal.

Unfortunately, current regulations and policies 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. Oxo-degradable, oxo-biodegradable, oxy-degradable, oxy-biodegradable, and degradable plastic bags are merely plastic bags with a chemical additive.

This chemical additive breaks the plastic molecular ties and expedites the disintegration of the plastic. Over time, these bags break down into smaller, more toxic petro-polymers, which eventually contaminate our soil and water, and enter the animal and human food chain. Paper bags have a high carbon and water footprint because more water and energy are used in their production 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. But considering their high water and energy use and low durability, paper bags should be restricted to the sale and serving of food and not as grocery or shopping bags.

Non-woven shopping bags, referred to colloquially as "recycle

bags" - although this is 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, and cannot be repaired, recycled or composted. Tests by consumer groups also found that a large percentage of these bags contain lead.

It is thus reiterated that paper bags, non-woven reusable shopping bags and most brands of "biodegradable" plastic bags do not reduce harm to the environment.

The solution to plastic pollution and waste reduction should incorporate the banning of small, lightweight plastic bags and distribution only of larger, thicker plastic bags for a small fee. Long-term

solutions include initiatives to encourage and increase recycling and composting to reduce household waste and correspondingly, the need for rubbish bags.

(iii) On the claim that the ban will not significantly reduce plastic pollution, many countries have banned, taxed or charged for plastic bags and these measures have been proven successful. Since Denmark introduced a charge on plastic bags in 1993, plastic bag usage halved from approximately 800 million to 400 million bags, or only 80 bags per person annually.

CNN Asia reported that China will save 37 million barrels of oil each year due to its ban on free plastic bags.

Considering that plastic bag bans and taxes have been successfully implemented and enforced in developed and developing countries, there is no reason that it cannot be workable and effective in Malaysia.

(v) Despite the claims of the plastics manufacturing industry, most plastics and polystyrene cannot be recycled. Polystyrene is hardly ever recovered for recycling due to its light weight, low scrap value, prohibitive cleaning and transportation costs and the fact that it is almost always contaminated with food, grease and other matter.

Some tips to help consumers remember to bring their reusable shopping bags and takeaway containers:

1. Choose lightweight and portable reusable bags that can be fold-

ed neatly and tucked into your handbag or backpack. Make a habit of carrying them with you whenever you leave the house.

2. Keep shopping bags in your car if you are in the habit of driving to run errands.

3. Keep reusable bags by the door where you will most likely see them as you are leaving the house.

4. Plan your shopping and include a written reminder in your shopping list.

5. Purchase or DIY a foldable, lightweight bag that is small enough to hook to your key chain

so you will always have at least one reusable bag with you.

The environmental, societal and human health benefits of reducing plastic usage and waste far outweigh the initial inconvenience of having to remember your reusable bags and containers.

WONG EE LYNN
Coordinator
Green Living Special Interest
Group
Malaysian Nature Society

The only reason free plastic bags appear affordable to the average citizen is that they are not aware of the environmental and economic costs of plastic waste.

