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So Aunty, So What? Wednesday, 11 January 2017

Beat it if you don't want to eat it

BY JUNE H.L. WONG



Why Selangor's plastic bag levy is another small but important step to saving our planet.

If you hear people complaining about Selangor's new year move to make consumers pay for plastic shopping bags, please ask them this:

"Have you heard of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch?"

If they haven't, tell them that this is the name given to the staggering amount of marine debris that is swirling in the Pacific Ocean.

The bulk of the 20% is fishing nets but the 80% of land-based trash is mostly - you've guessed it - plastic.

Thanks to our love for plastic, we have used and discarded so much of it that it is now overwhelming our seas and oceans and killing marine life.

Why the garbage patch is located in the Pacific is due to the system of circular ocean currents caused by the Earth's rotation and wind patterns that have created a gyre that traps the rubbish in the middle.

The patch covers a huge area of about 1mil sq km at the centre and spreads out to another 3.5mil sq km. And it's still growing.

Non-biodegradable plastic exposed to sunlight crumbles to bits of less than 5mm in diameter to become microplastics which float in the water for a very long time.

And just as we thought biodegradable plastic was the answer, the latest findings by the United Nations Environment Programme say otherwise.

According to UNEP chief scientist Dr Jacqueline McGlade, biodegradable plastics like shopping bags will only break down in temperatures of 50°C, which you don't find in the ocean.

And because such plastic will sink, it won't get the UV exposure that breaks it down either. They also get mistaken for food by marine animals and seabirds.

It has been estimated that the plastic debris kills one million seabirds and 100,000 mammals every year.

If all this information isn't scary enough, then consider this: a World Economic forum report predicts that if we continue with our merry plastic ways, the oceans will have more plastics than fish (by weight) by 2050.

The obvious problem is we are simply addicted to plastic because it is so cheap to manufacture and so darn convenient to use.

While Selangor is to be applauded for its plastic bag and polystyrene box restriction, I do think the state can do more.

Allowing retailers to charge their customers a mere 20 sen a bag or food container is like a convenient loophole. It's just too cheap.

Retailers should charge more, at least RM1, say some environmentalists. I would go further: RM2 a bag. Supermarkets should also provide empty cardboard boxes for their customers to pack their groceries to take home.

But if we are to have a shot at successfully weaning ourselves off plastic bags, we need to learn from others.

And there are many countries, developing and developed, that have outlawed or put a levy on plastic bags.

What I find most interesting and what can provide valuable lessons for us are the experiences of two countries which are like us in status - developing nations.

In 2002, Bangladesh became the first country in the world to ban lightweight polythene bags because their indiscriminate use and disposal had choked the country's drainage system, resulting in severe floods in the late 1990s.

The ban worked for a year or two. But enforcement was lax and the promised alternative of affordable jute bags did not materialise so people went back to using plastic bags.

More than a decade later, it appears most Bangladeshis have forgotten the ban and those plastic bags have reportedly made a comeback.

Then there is Rwanda. What this East African nation of 12 million people did is quite inspiring, considering the challenges it faced after emerging from the genocide of the 1990s.

In 2008, the government imposed a national ban on plastic bags for similar reasons as Bangladesh: they were obstructing sewer systems, hurting marine life as well as creating a huge littering problem.

It was a daunting task which would surely be unpopular given the widespread use of plastic bags.

But the Rwandan government, in rebuilding the nation, decided to give priority to environment protection.

Like Bangladesh, it instituted harsh penalties and anyone caught carrying a plastic bag was fined.

Even travellers entering Rwanda have their bags searched for plastic bags which will be confiscated.

The strict enforcement didn't go down well with small businesses but it made the ban effective. That and tax incentives given to plastic manufacturers to convert to other businesses.

That has made the difference and Rwanda can boast of a cleaner, plastic bag-free environment, which has helped boost its tourism industry.

Selangor's plastic bag reduction plan hinges on the levy approach; that is, to discourage its use by making people pay for it. It joins Penang and Malacca in doing so and other states like Perak, Johor and the Federal Territories are expected to follow suit.

As I said, I seriously doubt 20 sen will be a deterrent. It's education and awareness on the dangers of plastic pollution that is more important. That certainly worked on me.

I have made it a point to keep a rolled-up shopping bag in my handbag that can take quite a lot of purchases. It's a habit I started almost 10 years ago and now it's a must-have wherever I go, even overseas.

My car boot is also full of reusable shopping and chiller bags for my groceries. I bring containers for ordering takeaway food too.

Bringing my own bags and containers is actually easy-peasy. What I will find harder to give up are my ziplock bags and other plastics that keep my foodstuff sealed and belongings clean and dry.

What I can do without are disposable plastic water bottles. We use too many of them too easily. That's why I would urge the authorities to look into cutting down the use of plastic water bottles.

One way would be to encourage - better yet, make it mandatory - for shopping malls to have drinking fountains and for all restaurants to serve water in reusable jugs and cups to their customers. Ditto for companies holding meetings, seminars and conferences.

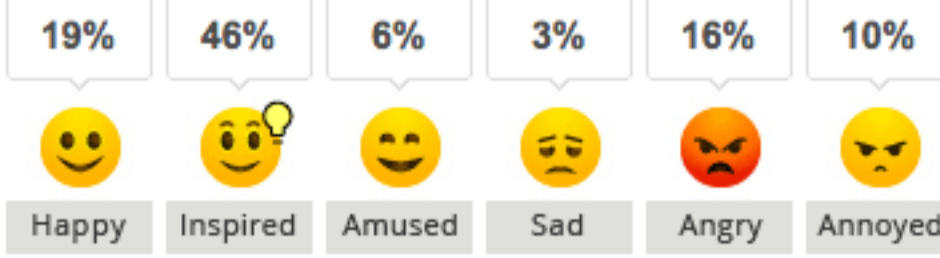
But first thing's first: if we the people of Selangor can at least reduce our dependence on ye olde plastic bag, then there's hope we can do more, Rwanda-style.

There really are no two ways about it if we are serious about saving our oceans and ultimately ourselves.

If we aren't, we have no one to blame but ourselves if the fish we eat is plastic, too.

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plastic bag ban, levy, Great Pacific Garbage Patch, biodegradable plastic, microplastics



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