

Let's Bag Plastic Bags

ALL it had taken was a moment's distraction. In a well-practiced sleight of hand, the cashier had double-bagged in plastic a dozen eggs, which were already encased in two protective layers of plastic. I briefly contemplated appealing for the liberation of my groceries but chose the path of least resistance. The deed was done, and the purveyors of plastic had been victorious on this occasion.

It was not always thus. In the late 1970s, single-use plastic bags were seldom available in grocery stores. Since then they have become an omnipresent part of the exchange of merchandise for money, a "free" offering to consecrate the ritual. An estimated one trillion bags are used each year globally, but they are so seamlessly ingrained into our daily routines that we hardly notice. It is difficult to imagine life without them.

The average American throws away about 10 single-use plastic bags per week, but New Yorkers use twice the national average. Some 23 billion are used across the state each year — more than enough, when tied together, to stretch to the moon and back 13 times. In the short trip from store to home the utility of these bags is spent, but the bags themselves can take millions of times longer to break down in landfill.

Yes, you are correct. This is crazy and entirely unnecessary. In Ireland, my home country, plastic bags were once an essential part of daily life. They were often found polluting waterways and littering the countryside, fluttering in trees and hedges. After a 15 euro cent fee was introduced in 2002, however, annual use dropped from an estimated 328 to 14 per person by 2014. Within a year of the fee's imposition, a national survey found that 90 percent of shoppers were using reusable bags; litter had also been reduced significantly.

Other countries have followed suit, though in a trickle, not a flood. But now political momentum is gathering across the globe to address the problems that plastics pose for the planet. Last year, Kenya banned plastic bags, becoming the latest of more than two dozen countries to either prohibit them or impose a fee for their use.

In the United States, California is the only state to have imposed a comprehensive solution to the plastic bag problem, banning single-use plastic bags in stores in 2014, an action then endorsed by voters in a statewide referendum in 2016. Dozens of municipalities have banned plastic bags or imposed fees to discourage their use, including Austin, Tex.; Chicago; and Seattle. New York State and Massachusetts may well find themselves on the front lines of the plastic bag war this year.

In January, the European Union responded with its first Europe-wide strategy on plastics, which aims to clamp down on single-use plastic items and ensure that they are fully recyclable by 2030.

All of this is part of a growing realization that our feckless use of plastics is out of control. This has become particularly evident in what is happening to the world's

oceans. In December, an important milestone was reached when 193 countries signed a United Nations resolution to monitor plastics disposal in the oceans and 39 countries committed to reducing the quantity of plastics going into the sea.

The United Nations Environment Program estimates that some eight million tons of plastic waste end up in the oceans each year, while a 2016 World Economic Forum report projects that there will be more plastic than fish by weight in the oceans by 2050 if current trends continue.

Momentum is building to tackle the problems plastics pose for the planet.



Plastic production and disposal also generates around 400 million tons of carbon dioxide a year globally, more than total annual emissions from Britain.

Millions of whales, birds, seals and turtles die because they mistake plastic bags for food or because they become ensnared in nets, packing bands and other items. Trillions of microplastics end up in the ocean, with seafood eaters ingesting an estimated 11,000 tiny pieces annually. Plastic fibers have also been found in tap water around the world; in one study, researchers found that 94 percent of water samples in the United States were affected. The impact on human health from direct exposure

to microplastics is unknown.

One of the most direct ways to begin to address this problem is by taking on the single-use plastic bag.

Following in the footsteps of California, Massachusetts may attempt this year to impose a statewide solution to the plastic bag problem. In December, Boston's mayor, Martin Walsh, signed an ordinance banning single-use plastic bags in city stores. With around 60 other municipalities in the state restricting or imposing fees on these bags, the State Legislature is considering banning them.

New York is another potential battleground. Efforts by former Mayor Michael Bloomberg and by Mayor Bill de Blasio to introduce a bag fee have been stymied in part by opposition from the "big plastic" lobby.

Last year Gov. Andrew Cuomo blocked a law that would have imposed a 5-cent fee on plastic bags in New York City and called instead for a statewide solution. The task force he established identified eight options in a report released in January, including voluntary initiatives, outright bans and fees. But it makes no specific recommendations.

In choosing a solution, it is important to understand the real cause of the plastic bag problem: the myth of free plastic. Retailers pay up to 5 cents per plastic bag, but the cost is hidden, passed on to shoppers through higher grocery prices. This is, no doubt, a brilliant business model for plastic manufacturers, but it has had a devastating impact on the planet.

Fees charged to consumers for each plastic bag undermine the foundation of this myth. They have a long track record of success, and not just across American cities. They have been effective in Denmark, Hong Kong, South Africa, Britain and Botswana. The average Dane, for example, now uses just four single-use plastic bags a year, after the introduction of a fee in 1994.

Some see fees as a regressive tax on seniors, the sick or the poor, but these arguments do not hold water. It is unjust to charge more for staples like food so that discretionary plastic items can be offered free, especially when there are alternatives. In any case, reusable bags can be provided for those in need.

Fees set above 15 cents that flow to an environmental fund strike a good balance between flexibility and effectiveness. They can be more politically acceptable than outright bans. For example, a survey of Irish citizens revealed that a remarkable 91 percent welcomed the fee because they witnessed the drop in litter and found reusable bags more suitable for carrying groceries.

The cultural impact can be game changing. As was the case with smoking indoors, the use of plastic bags becomes less socially acceptable over time once the government moves to restrict them. Reusable bags become the norm quicker than one might imagine, and shoppers seamlessly adapt their daily routines to the new reality. Action aimed at plastic bags can pave the way for further measures to address free coffee cups, lids, stirrers, cutlery, straws and takeout packaging.

When achieved, these small changes to our daily routines can be surprisingly empowering.

OPINION

BY JOSEPH CURTIN

A research fellow at the Institute of International and European Affairs, Dublin, and University College Cork, and a member of the Irish government's Climate Change Advisory Council.