

## **Banning the Plastic Shopping Bag in South Africa – An Idea Whose Time has Come**

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### **ABSTRACT**

What will it eventually take for humans to realise that the way we have been living in relationship to our natural environment is not working and needs to change?

Our reliance on the 'convenient' plastic shopping bag has taken its toll on our natural world and only because we have been negligent and excessive in its use.

It's past time we cultivated a culture of accountability because much of what we have repeatedly been doing has not produced desired results, and that is pure insanity.

How much more do we presume the earth will bear with all of the burdens we place on it? What if there was one achievable action that anyone and everyone could take to ease the waste load?

Consciously and doggedly refusing the plastic shopping bag can serve as a powerful catalyst to creating general environmental alertness within individuals. The added benefit of personal empowerment could serve to galvanize people into effective action to further aid our planet.

Banning the Two Oceans Aquarium staff from bringing plastic shopping bags into the workplace since April 2011 was a seemingly bold move on behalf of the Aquarium's Director, Dr Patrick Garratt. The outright ban was, at first, a shock to some people yet ongoing efforts by all have certainly paid off and it has become a way of life in the Aquarium.

This presentation aims to show how the non-essential plastic shopping bag is killing this world and to suggest solutions to Rethink the Bag.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

"Plastic is fantastic" is a smartly marketed and convincing slogan when taken at face-value. We could not live without it and plastic is cleverly designed to last so, with this in mind, why then do we use most plastic items only once and instantly throw them away, especially since there really is no "away"? Every piece of plastic that has ever been manufactured still exists in one form or another – it is either burnt into the atmosphere, sitting in landfill sites, floating in the ocean currents and rivers, or blemishing beautiful landscapes.

The plastic bag seems to have become the universal symbol of our uncaring abuse of the environment. In 2010 it was established that South Africans use approximately 8 billion plastic carrier bags annually (Dikgang, J., Leiman, A. & Visser, M., 2010). Ninety-six percent of these bags end up in landfill where they can last up to 1000 years (absurd when you consider that the average plastic bag is used for only 20 minutes or less!).

Ending up in landfill does not mean that the bags have been responsibly discarded. Their light weight ensures that they are easily carried away by the wind and this contributes to the large number of bags that are "lost" to the environment. Here they remain for decades and continue to have long term, harmful effects on natural systems including animals.



Figure 1: Genandendal Dumpsite (Candice Mostert)



Figure 2: Plettenberg Bay (Hayley McLellan)

All retailers who are either selling these carrier bags or giving them away free are responsible for contributing to the ongoing scourge of plastic bags across the South African landscape and in waterways. Big national brands are flaunting their names on plastic bags as advertising and then withdrawing any form of accountability thereafter.



Figure 3: Cape Town Harbour (Vincent Calder)

Plastic shopping bags deplete natural resources, consume energy to manufacture, create litter and choke marine life. Floating plastic bags in the ocean resemble jellyfish which turtles and whales mistake for food, ingesting these bags and dying. Not only are plastic bags a visual eyesore, municipalities also do not manage to keep up with the amount of plastic carrier bags that flow down our rivers into lakes and estuaries and into the oceans, interfering with all aquatic species.



Figure 4: Elsie's River, Pinelands (Renee Leeuwner)



Figure 5: Cape Town Harbour (Claire Taylor)

According to Ryan, "Marine litter needs a well-placed champion to promote awareness of the problem, and encourage commitment among other role-players and stakeholders." (Ryan, 2006).

### 1.1 Objective

The objective of the Rethink the Bag campaign is to ban the plastic bag in South Africa. We will not be the first region in the world and certainly cannot afford to be the last. Many other countries and cities around the world have already done so, although enforcement is sometimes questionable. See the list below detailing regions that have placed a ban on plastic shopping bags and the year in which this legislation was instituted.

Table 1: Examples of Plastic Bag Bans worldwide

year	country / region / town / county
2002	Bangladesh
2003	Taiwan
2005	Bhutan
2006	Tanzania
2007	San Francisco
2008	China
2008	Rwanda
2009	Delhi
2009	Maldives-Baa Atoll
2010	Mumbai
2011	Italy
2011	Philippines
2012/13	UAE
2013	67 Californian cities, towns, counties
2014	Hawaii, Kauai
2015	Chicago
2015	Oahu

Efforts made thus far by South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs, through the forming of Buyisa-e-Bag, have illustrated that much more stringent laws need to be implemented if they wish to eliminate plastic bag litter abuse. The attempt at a bag levy has revealed itself to have been completely unsuccessful in decreasing plastic bag pollution and an outright plastic bag ban, realistically, appears to be the only common-sense way forward in order to be effective in this endeavour in South Africa.

In support of this proposal, it is useful to look back at the history Buyisa e Bag between 2004 and 2011.

While the 2004 plastic bag tax, introduced by then Environment Minister Valli Moosa and managed by Buyisa-e-Bag, was intended for the purposes of cleaning up the environment, the Treasury does not allow monies to be kept separate for specific use so this meant that the bag levy simply became another tax. The Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism needs to apply to the Treasury to be allowed to use any money in the general reserve for recycling purposes, which involves much red tape to start any effective initiative. The board of Buyisa-e-Bag representatives were made up of industry and labour whilst retailers had chosen to leave and consumers were not represented either. Before the charge on plastic shopping bags, every retailer bore the cost. Since charging for said bag it stands to reason that there is now big profit to be made from selling this item, especially if the figures are to be believed that South African use approximately 8 billion plastic shopping bags per annum. Handsome profit is easily the assumption and yet retailers who are prepared to comment state that they in fact make a loss on the sale of plastic shopping bags.

Information received in June 2014 from Transpaco and East Rand Plastics supports the following figures of the cost of manufacturing plastic shopping bags; the cost to retailers and consumers; and the profits made by both producers and retailers:

Table 2: Breakdown of plastic bag cost, retail and profit in the market

	cost	selling price	profit
Raw Materials	R20/kg		
Manufacturing cost incl. printing 1.8xR20/kg	R36/kg		
Bag manufacturer	28.8c per 8 gram bag	33.2c	4.4c
Retailer	33.2c	44c average	4.8c (15% after 6c levy/bag)

The above figures are supported by the Plastics SA authority on technical issues regarding plastics.

The 2008 Buyisa-e-Bag meeting minutes, below, provide a snap shot of this organisation’s course between 2004 and 2008.

“Buyisa-e-Bag Multi-Recycling Buy Back Centre, a Section 21 company, whose core business was to develop entrepreneurs and create sustainable opportunities in the recycling and waste management sectors, briefed the Committee on the setting up of multi recycling Buy-Back centres. Such centres would buy in, sort and resell various plastics, paper, cans, and glass. A total of 20 centres were planned, and the investment to date had been R10 million. The initial focus would be Gauteng and Mpumalanga, but would be rolled out to all provinces. The presentation set out in detail the strategies, key performance areas, economic and social benefits, and it was noted that the company would try to ensure sustainable development and best business practice, while empowering the local communities, in particular youth groups. Mr Benny Makgoga, CEO, Buyisa-e-Bag noted that the estimated budget for the set-up of each centre, including the machinery and structure, training, protective clothing, branding, security and insurance and launch publicity, was R1.84 million. Most sites were around 5 000 square metres in size. He noted that Buyisa-e-Bag would provide monitoring and control, and would require monthly and annual reports on financial and operational performance. It envisaged providing three-year support. Finally he mentioned that Buyisa-e-Bag was very proud to be working with the youth groups in the townships, as that initiative provided sustainable jobs, and they were known as “Ambassadors of Environment”. Ms C Zikalala (IFP) commended Mr Makgoga and his delegation on the work they were doing. She mentioned that she was one of the people who had conducted awareness through the press about the role of Buyisa. People in the townships had no knowledge of plastic recycling, and it was not visible in the townships around Gauteng. She commended the institution on its youth development work because young people were the leaders of tomorrow. The Buy Back centres should be visible, rather than heard about only in Committee meetings”. (Buyisa e Bag minutes of June 2008)

After 8 years of levy collecting Buyisa e Bag is stated to have collected almost one billion Rand from the consumer with none of their initial objectives or obligations having being met. A Statement by the Department of Environmental Affairs on Buyisa-e-Bag following a review process on 1 June 2011 reveals the following.

“Buyisa-e-Bag was created as a result of the Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) signed between industry, labour and government during 2002 and was established in 2004/05. Its intended objectives were, among others, the expansion of waste collection networks, the establishment of rural waste collection small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs), creating additional capacity in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), job creation, improving skills and re-skilling workers in the plastics field. The Department of Environmental Affairs, as sole funder of the company became concerned about, amongst others, the governance, expenditure and performance of the Company - concerns also shared amongst others by the National Treasury. The department then concluded that the company has failed to meet the objectives as set out in the founding MoA between government, labour and industry”.

Even by 2012 not one organization could accurately say how many plastic shopping bags were being recycled each year. The figure could well have been as low as 5 percent. Other confusing statistics released to the public only served to cast more mystery over the topic as, while plastic bag sales were stated to have dropped between 45 and 75 percent since regulations were passed, treasury figures showed more than double the amount of monies flowing in from bag sales in 2010/11 as opposed to 2009/10. (Capazario 2012) It also became clear that more people were not reusing the bags on return visits to the stores but rather using them as bin liners at home in which case nearly all of the bags were ending up in landfill after only one single use from the store of origin. Manufacturing a thicker bag and charging for it never did achieve the intended outcome of placing more value on the item.

## 2 A CASE STUDY: RWANDA

The Rwandan Government successfully banned the plastic shopping bag in 2008 and this ruling is effectively enforced to date. Any visitors entering Kigali International airport carrying plastic bags are immediately informed of the law regarding plastic bags and the bags are confiscated from their person. For a nation who suffered shocking genocide in 1994, banning the plastic shopping bag seems to be the last thing one would imagine the country to have on their agenda. However, after acknowledging the devastation that plastic bags were causing their environment, and particularly their agricultural productivity, the Rwandan Department of Environmental Affairs took this radical step to enforce the law. They even went one step further in creating Umuganda (community service or 'coming together in common purpose to achieve an outcome') in which all citizens, aged 18-65, are duty bound to step out into their environment on the last Saturday of every month and clean up their neighbourhood and surrounds of all litter, as well as contribute to other community upliftment projects. This has proven to be an example of a model project which could successfully be introduced to South Africa and has, in fact, begun in Umuganda Sea Point – 26/7/14.

In 2008, the capital of Rwanda, Kigali, received the UN Habitat Scroll of Honour Award for their zero tolerance for plastic bags, among other environmental achievements. Kigali is the first city to win this respected award in Africa. Considering the devastating genocidal events of 1992, it is quite remarkable that a nation would choose to focus on such a monumental environmental undertaking and in doing so transform the state of its country. People now come from all over the world to learn from the actions taken by the Rwandan government.

Here follows part of the Rwanda story in an interview with Dr. Rose Mukankomeje, Director General of the Rwanda Environment Management (the delicious day) <http://www.thedeliciousday.com/environment/rwanda-plastic-bag-ban/>

“Who initiated the plastic bag ban in Rwanda?”

The Government of Rwanda through the Ministry in charge of environment. A scientific study was conducted on the impact of plastic bags on the Rwandan environment, as well as the plastic bags contribution to the economy of our country. The study showed an overwhelming negative impact of plastic bags on the environment which lead the Government of Rwanda to banning the plastic bag.

Rwandan law prohibits all manufacturing, use, importing and selling of all polyethylene bags in Rwanda.

“Did Rwanda ever consider charging a fee for the bags instead of implementing a countrywide ban?”

No, the cost of plastic bags is so little and our primary concern was how plastic bags were being disposed of after use. We knew we wanted the countrywide ban because of the havoc the plastic bags were creating on our environment. The problems the plastic bags were causing were both environmental problems and lasting social economic implications to the development of our country.

“Who expressed concerns about banning the plastic bag and how were these concerns addressed?”

Industries that manufactured plastic bags as well as businesses and people that imported plastic bags for sale and profit gains had concerns. We addressed their concerns by asking the manufacturers of plastic bags in Rwanda to recycle [plastic] instead of manufacturing it. We also provided tax incentives to companies for purchasing equipment that would help recycle plastic or manufacture environmental friendly bags. In cases where the use of polyethylene bags is inevitable (In healthcare polyethylene bags are used during collection and transportation for disposal of bio-medical wastes. Also, agriculture polyethylene bags can be used for construction of greenhouses), an Order of the Prime Minister establishes is required to approve their usage.

“What were the positive and negative impacts on private businesses to the plastic bag ban?”

In the short term, community based associations sprung up comprised of mainly women and youth cooperatives to make bags made from locally available environmental friendly materials. Private businesses, of course, had to re-strategize their business model in order to orient their businesses to recycling or manufacturing bags. And of course another major positive is that entire the country of Rwanda is clean.

“What has been the environmental impact of the plastic bag ban in Rwanda?”

Rwanda became an extraordinarily clean country. Tourism is increasing which is very good economically for our country.

“How did you educate the Rwandan citizens on the ban and were there any difficulties in this education process?”

The constitution of Rwanda states that every citizen has the right to a clean and healthy environment. Part of what we do in Rwanda to ensure our communities stay clean is we have monthly Umuganda, which is monthly community work. During this time people and leaders clean their communities and during talks of the [plastic bag] ban there were discussions [during Umuganda] regarding the advantages of doing away with plastic bags. Part of the communication efforts included testimonies from farmers whose cows had died due to accidentally eating the plastic bags littered in their farms as well as stories from others about how plastic bags had negatively impacted their lives. We also had TV and radio campaigns against plastic bag usage and short videos we distributed to buses and airlines to educate travelers to Rwanda about our plastic bag ban. But there were initial difficulties with this because good alternatives did not exist and we had to import environmentally friendly bags.

“What advice do you have for other cities, states, provinces or countries who are considering banning the plastic bag?”

Identify incentives to industries to produce alternatives to plastic bags. Create public awareness and social media campaigns. Get the media involved in the effort. Develop laws and regulations to support banning the plastic bag and form strong partnerships with all public sectors.

“Now that the ban has been in place for 4 years, do you believe the majority of Rwandans support the plastic bag ban?”

The Rwandan people are aware of the negative impacts of plastic bags and support the ban. If they didn't plastic bags would be being illegally brought into our country. Rwandans also support the setting up of cottage industries that are finding alternatives to plastic bags. These cottage industries have helped reduce poverty and create non-agricultural based jobs for Rwandans” ([www.santefe.com](http://www.santefe.com))





Figure 6: Rwanda bag ban (www.superstock.com)



Figure 7: Rwanda, clean streets of Kigali (www.umeseke.rw)

### 3 RETHINK THE BAG CAMPAIGN IN SOUTH AFRICA

Since its inception, in March 2011, the Rethink the Bag campaign has been an official environmental campaign of the Two Oceans Aquarium and the Aquarium’s staff areas have been successfully plastic bag free. The staff embraced this initiative with relative ease and, three years down the line, the message has even spread further into the daily operations of the surrounding V&A Waterfront.

Encouragingly, the campaign has also been embraced by other organisations and companies. One that is definitely worth mentioning is the African Association of Zoos and Aquaria. Rethink the Bag was adopted as their official 2013-2015 conservation program and is currently being rolled out to all members in the animal care field throughout Africa, with some keen participation reported thus far. Rethink the Bag won best presentation as well as delegates choice awards at the 2013 AKAA (Animal Keepers Association of Africa) Conference.

The transition town of Greyton, in the Western Cape, officially became the first town in South Africa to ban the plastic shopping bag on the 3rd July 2014. This community recognised the growing concern over pollution in their environment and chose to ban the bag in order to draw attention to all forms of waste. Their ingenious approach of transforming “trash to treasure” has been most effective in encouraging the locals to view their garbage in a whole new light, that is one of value rather than waste.

Momentum is gathering as other small towns have shown interest in following Greyton’s lead. In Hout Bay the retail stores of Oakhurst Spar, Super Spar, Tops, ; Engen, Fresh Stop, OK Mini Mart, Shell Shop and other smaller brands honoured 3 July-International Plastic Bag Free Day in 2014 by agreeing to not sell or give away any plastic shopping bags on this day. Hout Bay Super Spar have committed to plastic bag free Thursdays in store and Kwik Spar to every second Thursday. In conjunction with the Rethink the Bag campaign, the NPO Thrive is working towards plastic bag free Thursdays across the whole of Hout Bay town. Collaboration to replicate the Rethink the Bag campaign in Montagu, in the Western Cape is also currently in motion.

Rethink the Bag has been presented to all schools in Greyton, Bereaville, Genadendal, Hout Bay, Camps Bay and Llandudno. Wynberg schools have taken on the challenge to become the first plastic bag free school zone in the country and then challenge other schools to follow suit.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

I have observed that people are intrinsically good at heart and want to be the change they wish to see in the world. Sometimes all one needs is a passionate individual to lead the way by sharing what resonates most strongly with them. These individuals are all around us. I have, very successfully, not used a plastic shopping bag of any sort for almost seven years. Rather than inconvenience me, this choice empowered me and if I can do it, anyone can! My decision to committedly refuse the single use plastic shopping bag served as a powerful catalyst to creating even greater environmental consciousness within me.

Plastic shopping bags appear to be a modern day convenience yet, with little conscious effort, could easily become an obsolete item. We take this bag entirely for granted and, moreover, disregard the bigger picture of its overall negative impact. There are many alternatives to plastic shopping bags. Long-life, reusable bags are available everywhere these days. One must be aware not to replace one problem with another. Shoppers must ensure that they have a small collection of quality, locally sourced, community supported bags which they remember to take to the stores on every visit. Changing habitual behavior is certainly not easy, but it's also not a good enough excuse to continue treating our planet as we currently are. It's all about making a committed choice and then following through to form a new, healthy, habit.

"It's the tip of an iceberg. About one percent of the plastic worldwide is plastic bags. The goal of a plastic bag ban is to draw a line in the sand so that at checkout tills when one is faced with no longer being able to get a plastic shopping bag, this becomes a powerful education tool for the other 99% of plastics that exist." (Wilson 2011). The efforts of Buyisa e Bag were futile and South African shoppers should be questioning why they are still being charged a bag levy three years after this failed organization has disbanded?

Looking around, it is clear to see that South Africa has a sizeable problem with discarded litter. A plastic bag ban in South Africa could facilitate raised awareness surrounding our excessive plastic consumption, littering in general and the responsible disposal of our personal garbage. This could become an effective way for South Africa to move forward in addressing the pressing problem of waste, both on land and in the oceans. It could also draw the South African community, at large, to stand together to create the common goal of cleaning up our countryside which will naturally engender increased pride and unity. Umuganda in action!

Clause 24 of the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 states that "Everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being and to have the environment protected for the benefit of present and future generations." If adopted by millions of South African citizens, this choice could just be enough for us to make the difference we owe our only life support system, Mother Earth.

Rethink the Bag is an established and successfully growing campaign and I invite the community of South Africa to join this exciting journey.

Can you give up plastic bags in your life, and can South Africa take a stand and Ban the Bag?

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