

Unfairly trashed: plastic bags

BY LORNE GUNTER, FOR THE NATIONAL POST FEBRUARY 28, 2011

At the beginning of the year, the pharmacy/convenience store in my neighbourhood - part of a large national chain - started charging a nickel per shopping bag. Each time I have checked out purchases since then, the cheery cashier has asked, "Would you like a bag for five cents?" -to which I have replied, with increasing exasperation, "No, thank you, I would like one for free."

Stores that have begun charging for bags may as well be telling customers, "Thanks for shopping here, now you figure out how to get your stuff home. Yeah, sure, we're happy enough that you dropped a few bucks (or quite a few) in our store, but what you do with your purchases is none of our concern. Please pick up your crap and go."

The geniuses at the drugstore chain's head office who ordered the surcharge on plastic bags were, no doubt, sure they were on to something. They'd be showing their concern for the environment by encouraging customers to bring their own permanent, cloth shopping bags. They'd be showing they have a social conscience and that they were in tune with their customers' desires to go fashionably "green." (Not to mention that charging five cents for a bag that costs the chain a fraction of cent, multiplied by millions of bags per year, is good for the bottom line.)

Except a lot of consumers bristled. Cashiers took a lot of abuse. Bags are once again free. In less than six weeks, the ecotyrranny has been toppled. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who didn't care being told things such as, "Well, at least we're not in Fort McMurray, where shopping bags are banned altogether," or, "Remember that in Toronto, bags are taxed."

Plastic shopping bags have become one of those bones the eat-your-peas crowd has got clenched in its teeth. The sacks have become important (and evil) symbols for environmentalists, who because of their symbolic worth have expended more effort to have them banned than the bans could ever possibly save in environmental damage.

Plastic bags have become for eco-crusaders what cellphones in cars have become for safety fanatics - the embodiment of all that is wrong. Never mind that statistics show how hands-free and hand-held cellphones are equally dangerous when driving, and that neither is more likely to cause accidents than eating while driving or having a sip of water, changing the radio, putting on makeup or checking a toddler in the back seat. Safety nannies have got it in their heads that drivers must be forbidden the use of hand-held cells, and that's all there is to it.

It's the same with greenies and banning plastic shopping bags: No amount of contrary information can persuade them to change their minds. So they will not be interested in a recent report in the Independent newspaper from London.

Apparently, the Independent has learned, a 2007 study commissioned by the U.K. Environment Agency determined that "plastic carriers," as the Brits call shopping bags, cause the least environmental damage among plastic, paper and cloth alternatives.

I wonder why the eco-obsessed U.K. government has so far refused to publish the study?

"For each use," the easily reused and easily recycled plastic options are "almost 200 times less damaging to the climate than cotton hold-alls favoured by environmentalists, and have less than one-third of the CO2 emissions than paper bags." To be as environmentally friendly as plastic bags, paper bags would have to be used at least three times and cloth bags over 300 times. But as the U.K. government study found, the typical paper bag is used only once and the average cloth bag only 51 times before being discarded.

Environmentalists are constantly being bitten by the law of unintended consequences. Their well-intentioned, fashionable causes often do more harm than good. Consider the way their push for biofuels has distorted world food markets and placed lots of basic foodstuffs -especially corn -beyond the reach of the world's poor. Their push for wind turbines has produced very little cheap power, but has led to the deaths of millions of birds and bats annually.

So expect the push to ban shopping bags to intensify rather than wane, because environmentalism isn't as much about saving the planet as it is about environmentalists proving their moral superiority and getting to tell everyone else how to live.

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