

For Earth Day 2018 and beyond, say no to plastic bags

I saw a lot of fantastic sights on a recent trip to Ireland. But it was only after I came home that I realized there was a common staple of life that I hadn't seen there.

This year's Earth Day theme is "End Plastic Pollution," and I discovered that Ireland, progressive little country that it is, had passed a plastic bag tax in 2002. It was then I realized I hadn't seen any plastic bags in Ireland.

No bags blew through the air like kites on the Ring of Kerry. No one bagged my T-shirts in plastic at the Killarney Brewery. The streets of Dublin yielded not one sighting of the ubiquitous bag lofting over the River Liffey.

Ireland hadn't "banned" the plastic bag, but when they placed a fairly steep tax — about 22 euro cents or 27 cents American — they also started a public relations campaign to explain the importance of ending the reliance on plastic. Soon, lots of ordinary people began purchasing reusable canvas bags and keeping them handy.

The money from the tax goes, fittingly enough, to the ministry of the environment. And to enforce the purpose of the tax, stores were prohibited from simply paying the tax on the bags themselves and passing the cost on in some other way. And although my souvenirs were bagged in paper, grocers were warned not to merely substitute paper for plastic.

The amazing thing, according to a New York Times story run a few years after the tax was enacted, was that within a few weeks, plastic bag use dropped by over 90 percent. Like smoking too close to the office door, or failing to clean up after Rover, it became socially unacceptable to be seen using plastic.

Omaha, the city where I live, is currently having a discussion about imposing a fee for plastic bags. Just as in other cities where it has been debated, there are arguments on both sides.

Paper bags, while biodegradable, take more energy to create. Canvas bag must be

washed occasionally. Some jurisdictions worry that jobs in plastic manufacturing will be lost. (Ireland had no plastic manufacturing and got most of theirs from China.)

But here's the powerful flip side: According to The Wall Street Journal, 100 billion plastic bags are thrown away in the U.S. annually. They poison and injure marine life. In the past few days, a dead sperm whale was discovered with 64 pounds of garbage in his digestive system, lots of it plastic.

Plastic bags litter our beaches and landscapes. Few of them are biodegradable, and will be around for hundreds of years, clogging our waterways and piling up in our landfills. We're desecrating our sacred environment.

The Wall Street Journal also reports that the World Economic Forum found that by 2050, there will be more plastic than fish, by weight, in the oceans. Plastic threatens our planet's survival, which is why 25 countries have tried to initiate programs to reduce single use plastic.

What can we do against 100 billion bags? By using recyclable bags, we can each save hundreds of plastic ones yearly. Keep them in the car where you'll remember them. Take the ones you do get to the recycle bins that most grocery stores offer.

Earth Day 2018 urges us to reduce, refuse, reuse, recycle and remove plastic. Not just bags, but the single use plastics that are so ubiquitous in our society.

Carry your own utensils when you know you'll be offered plastic. Take your own container to the restaurant for leftovers. Be the example that may help change attitudes the way the Irish did.

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