



# Say NO to Plastic Bags

*The plastic bag is an accepted part of Australia's shopping culture, but it shouldn't be. Each year we use 6.9 billion new plastic shopping bags, many of which remain in the environment.*

## The problem

### Impact of plastic bags on the environment

#### Natural resources

Plastics are made from non-renewable natural resources such as crude oil, gas and coal. Just 8.7 checkout bags contain enough embodied petroleum energy to drive a car 1km.<sup>2</sup>

#### Persistence in the environment

Non-biodegradable plastics bags can last in the environment for up to 1,000 years.

#### Litter

Landscapes littered with plastic bags are hazardous to wildlife and visually unattractive. What's more, because plastic bags last so long, every year the number of plastic bags littering the environment increases. Plastic bags are lightweight and moisture resistant which means they float easily in air and water, often travelling long distances.

It is estimated that a total of between 50 and 80 million bags enter the Australian environment as litter every year.<sup>2</sup> Unless they are collected, they stay there. If 80 million plastic bags were made into a single plastic sheet, it would cover 16 square kilometres. Each side of the plastic sheet would be 4km long and it would be big enough to cover the Melbourne CBD.

#### Clean up costs

It has been estimated that it costs governments, businesses and community groups over \$4 million per annum to clean up littered plastic shopping bags.<sup>2</sup>

#### Marine life

There are approximately 46,000 pieces of plastic floating in each square mile of our oceans. It is estimated that plastic kills up to

1 million sea birds, 100,000 sea mammals and countless fish each year.<sup>3</sup> 90% of Albatross chicks on Midway Island (a remote Pacific atoll) had plastic bag remnants in their gullets, while turtles, dolphins and killer whales can choke or starve by confusing plastic bags for jellyfish.

#### Landfills

An estimated, 6.67 billion or 36,700 tonnes of plastic bags are disposed of in landfill sites throughout Australia each year.<sup>2</sup> Some plastic shopping bags are disposed directly into the waste stream, while many are reused as garbage bags, and subsequently sent to landfill.

#### Greenhouse gases

When oil, gas and coal are used to produce plastic bags, they emit dangerous greenhouse gases. The burning of plastics also creates emissions of toxic gases, dioxins and heavy metals.

Greenhouse gases contribute to worldwide climate change. Scientists predict that such climate change will impact on all our lives, especially in the areas of agriculture and health.

Plastic bags are made from two types of plastic:

1. *High Density Polyethylene (HDPE) bags* - The thin 'singlet-style' bags used by over 80% of retailers. 50% of HDPE bags come from non-supermarket sources. This plastic can easily be recycled.

2. *Low Density Polyethylene (LDPE) bags* - The thicker bags used by less than 20% of retailers, usually department and boutique stores. These bags are not currently recycled.

## Did you know?

- *Australians dump 4000 recyclable plastic bags into landfills every minute, or 230,000 every hour.<sup>1</sup>*
- *It takes 36,850 tonnes of plastic to produce 6.9 billion plastics bags.<sup>2</sup>*
- *If 6.9 billion plastic bags were tied together, they would circle the globe 42 ½ times.*
- *Plastic shopping bags can be returned to your supermarket for recycling.*

### Plastic Bags and Clean Up Australia Day

- *Each year on Clean Up Australia Day we identify plastic as the major source of rubbish throughout Australia.*
- *In 2005, 32% of all items collected were plastic and 7% of all plastic items were supermarket and retail shopping bags.*
- *In 2005, 12.7% of bags were found at rivers/creeks, followed by 10% found at beach/coastal areas.*

*Clean Up - inspiring and working with all Australians to clean up, fix up and conserve our environment.*

# Saying NO is easy

In response to the plastic bag problem, Clean Up Australia developed **Say NO to Plastic Bags** - a National Plastic Bag Action and Awareness campaign.

## The Campaign

Clean Up Australia is committed to getting rid of lightweight plastic shopping bags.

**Saying NO to Plastic Bags** brings community, business, government and environment groups together to **Refuse, Reduce, Reuse and Recycle** plastic bags.

By the end of 2004 participating retailers have committed to reduce the number of plastic bags used by 25% and increase recycling by 15%.

## Things you can do today

### Refuse

- If you're only buying a couple of items, consider carrying them.
- When shopping, take reusable alternatives like calico bags, string bags, baskets or boxes with you. Keep them in the car, or put your car keys in them at home so you don't forget to take them with you.
- Consolidate purchases into one bag rather than getting a new bag at each store.
- Place fruit and vegetables directly into your basket.
- Be aware that the thicker department store bags are generally non-recyclable, so the best action is to avoid taking them.

### Reduce

- Count the number of plastic bags you use and aim to reduce that number each week.
- If you have no other option than to accept plastic bags at the checkout, make sure at least eight items are in each bag.
- Avoid putting items that already have handles, eg. dog food and nappies, into plastic bags.

- Avoid using small plastic bags as bin liners. Simply put your rubbish straight into your household bin and give the bin a quick rinse afterwards then reuse the water on your garden.
- Degradable plastic bags are becoming available. However, be cautious when using these bags, as there are no standards in place to test the effectiveness of their biodegradability.

### Reuse

- Reuse plastic bags at home for: freezing food, packing children's school lunches, storage of clothing and other household items.
- Keep a spare reusable shopping bag in your handbag or wallet for those times when you thought you would not need a bag, but did.

### Recycle

It is estimated that in 2001-02, approximately 180 million bags or 1,000 tonnes, were recycled. This represents only 2.7% of all plastic shopping bags.<sup>2</sup> Help us to increase that rate to 50% by the end of 2004 by:

- Finding a local supermarket that offers recycling facilities for plastic supermarket bags and taking your used plastic bags back for recycling the next time you go shopping.
- Returning unwanted plastic bags to the driver for recycling if you have your shopping delivered.
- Turning bags inside out and removing any receipts and food scraps before recycling. Contamination can cause problems in production and prevent recycled plastic from being used.
- Approaching your local council to see if they have plans to include plastic bags in kerbside recycling.



## References

<sup>1</sup> Worldwide Home Environmentalists Network  
[home.vicnet.net.au/~when/plastic.htm](http://home.vicnet.net.au/~when/plastic.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Environment Australia, **Plastic Shopping Bags- Analysis of Levies and Environmental Impacts** (Nolan ITU, 2002)  
[www.deh.gov.au/industry/waste/plastic-bags/bags-analysis.html](http://www.deh.gov.au/industry/waste/plastic-bags/bags-analysis.html)

<sup>3</sup> Australian Marine Conservation Society  
[www.amcs.org.au](http://www.amcs.org.au)

<sup>4</sup> Environmental Protection and Heritage Council  
[www.ephc.gov.au](http://www.ephc.gov.au)

<sup>5</sup> EcoRecycle  
[www.ecorecycle.vic.gov.au](http://www.ecorecycle.vic.gov.au)

<sup>6</sup> NSW Department of Environment and Conservation  
[www.epa.nsw.gov.au](http://www.epa.nsw.gov.au)

### Shopper driven action:

- If you can't find the recycling bin at your supermarket, suggest to the store manager that it's put in a more prominent place.
- Suggest to your local retailers that they stock plastic bag alternatives.
- If you are a retailer, school, council or community groups and you want to do more – contact us to join in our Say NO to plastic bags campaign.



CLEAN UP AUSTRALIA LIMITED  
ABN 93 003 884 991

Level 1, 18 Bridge Road,  
Glebe NSW 2037 AUSTRALIA  
Tel: +61 2 9552 6177

Fax: +61 2 9552 4468  
Email: [cleanup@cleanup.com.au](mailto:cleanup@cleanup.com.au)  
Web: [www.cleanup.com.au](http://www.cleanup.com.au)