

## Bulgaria Joins Growing Fight Against Plastic Bags

by Jennifer Hattam, Istanbul, Turkey on 01. 9.11



Photo: [Hello Turkey Toe](#) / [Creative Commons](#).

It doesn't seem to matter what you're buying in Turkey -- a bottle of juice you're going to drink immediately, a tiny pen, or a half-kilo of cherries that's already *in* a plastic bag -- it's a heck of a task to keep from getting the item handed to you in a plastic bag. I long ago learned to say "A plastic bag is not necessary; I can put it in my purse" in Turkish, but most of the time I might as well be speaking Chinese for the uncomprehending looks I get back. Still, though, things are *yavaş yavaş* (slowly, slowly) changing -- in Turkey and elsewhere in the region.

Neighboring [Bulgaria](#)'s move to impose a tax on plastic bags as of July 1, 2011, as reported in the *Sophia Echo* is only the latest attempt across Eastern Europe and the Middle East to discourage the use of disposable bags.

The nascent Environment Ministry in [Syria](#) -- where an estimated 15 million bags are consumed each day just Damascus and the area around in the capital -- has distributed fabric and paper bags to markets as part of a campaign to get people to just say "no" to plastic bags. While paper bags are not particularly environmentally friendly in their manufacture, they pose less of a danger to animals.

### Dead Camels in the UAE

In the United Arab Emirates, dead [camels](#) have been found with lumps of plastic in their stomach weighing up to 30 kilograms -- the equivalent of 4,000 plastic bags. Reports the local newspaper *The National*:

The [30-kilogram] plastic rock once filled the stomach of a camel. It grew gradually as the animal grazed on discarded plastic debris, eventually blocking its stomach and causing a slow and agonizing death... The man who discovered the piece, Dr. Ulrich Wernery, a Dubai-based scientist and activist, has spent years campaigning for people to stop littering and to cut down their use of plastic. His find was retrieved from what he calls "the valley of death," a spot in Lipsa where dead camels, cows, sheep and goats are discarded. Dr. Wernery often finds plastic lumps of various sizes along with the remains of the animals.

Such dangers are part of the message of animated educational films being created by the [UAE](#)'s Ministry of Environment and Water as part of the "Emirates Free from Plastics" initiative. According to the ministry, which plans to ban plastic bags in the UAE by 2012, 85 percent of emirate residents "say they have heard or read about the detrimental effects of plastic bags, but fewer than half do anything about it."

### Baskets And Cloth Bags As Alternatives

The United Nations is meanwhile working to raise awareness about plastic bags' harmful impact on the environment in [Jordan](#), where the population of 6 million people uses an estimated 3 billion plastic bags a year. The move hearkens back to an earlier time, when people regularly did their shopping with baskets, Environment Minister Hazem Malhas said.

[Turkey](#) is also taking slow steps toward breaking the plastic-bag habit, though they have not been without some implementation troubles. The [Kadıköy](#) district of Istanbul was praised last year for being the first municipality in Turkey to ban plastic bags. Shoppers at the area's many food markets say, however, that alternatives -- such as [cloth bags](#) for sale -- are not always available.