



Could 2013 spell the end for plastic bags?

By Sophie PILGRIM the 03/01/2013 - 22:21

Mali and Mauritania became the latest African countries to ban plastic bags this week in what appears to be an increasingly popular environmental gesture. Could we soon see an end to plastic bags, and if so, what will replace them?

The production and use of plastic bags became a criminal offence in both Mauritania and Mali on December 31, making Africa the leading continent in the global crackdown on plastic bags. Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa and Kenya have already banned ultra-thin plastic bags, while Rwanda and Somalia have banned them completely.

In a celebratory statement welcoming the news, Mali's environment ministry described plastic bags as a "disastrous scourge" and "a menace to public health". As in Bangladesh, which became the first country in the world to outlaw polythene bags in 2002, Malian authorities say discarded bags block drainage systems, in turn causing aggravated flooding in urban areas.

They also pose a dangerous risk to animals such as sea turtles, which are known to consume plastic bags (because they are thought to look like jellyfish) and subsequently die. In the United Arab Emirates, camels were used to highlight the danger of plastic bags to animals after the skeletal remains of a camel were found surrounding a giant ball of polythene, lying intact in what would have been the animal's stomach.

Authorities said that around half of the country's camels were dying from starvation caused by plastic consumption. Today, only oxo-biodegradable plastics, which decompose in air or water, are allowed in the country.

Cities in India, Pakistan, Mexico and the US have also banned plastic bags in recent years, and in 2011, Italy became the first European country to do so. France plans to follow suit in 2014. Even China, which is often criticised as environmentally irresponsible, restricts the use of plastic bags.

'Tip of the iceberg'

But while environmental groups lend their support to such initiatives, they are keen to highlight a much larger problem.

"People think that once you get rid of plastic bags it's going to solve all our littering problems," Neil Verlander of Friends of the Earth told FRANCE 24. "But plastic bags are

just the tip of the iceberg. They make up a very small part of the huge amount of material we throw away.”

Verlander also pointed out the impracticalities of imposing a total bag ban, a problem which Mauritians will be discovering this year. Mamadou Fall, a hostel owner from the southern city of Rosso, told FRANCE 24 that locals were largely nonplussed by the initiative, which had “made no change” to the behaviour of shoppers so far. “We’re not totally against this idea, but it can’t work until the government offers us an alternative. How can we take home our sugar once we have weighed and bought it, if we don’t have a plastic bag to put it in?”

But providing an alternative bag is not the answer, environmentalists argue. While paper bags are biodegradable, they cost more in time, energy and natural resources than plastic bags do to produce. And heavyweight “bags for life”, which are not biodegradable, must be employed as instructed – for life – if they are to be considered a viable alternative.

In fact, the world’s most efficient bag ban did not involve a “bag ban” at all, but instead, a “bag levy”. Introduced in Ireland in 2002, the law initially saw customers charged 15 euro centimes per plastic bag. Within weeks, plastic bag use had fallen by 95%, and 90% of shoppers were using their own bags. Today, a bag costs 22 euro centimes, and the scheme has generated €166m for the government’s Environment Fund. Encouraging shoppers to provide their own bag, rather than offering them a paper one, makes disposable bags in any form, a thing of the past.

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