

"Britain should introduce a plastax," says Holland & Barrett CEO

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Entrepreneurs usually lead the way in innovation. But sometimes a corporate will take the initiative and pioneer new ways of doing business. At a press briefing at London Zoo today, Holland & Barrett unveiled its green strategy for the coming year. It's bold, brave, and Large Blue.

When the Republic of Ireland introduced its 15-cents-per-unit plastic bag tax in 2002, high-street retailers across Europe prayed that their governments would not follow suit. But one company reacted very differently.

"When the Irish government cracked down on plastic bags, there was an impressive cultural change," says Holland & Barrett CEO Peter Aldis. "Don't get me wrong, I don't like raising taxes. But I would encourage the government to introduce the same thing here. In the UK, we use 13,000 plastic bags a year each. In Germany, they use 0.0002. We need to convert customers to the way they should be."

To achieve this end, Holland & Barrett is the first UK retailer to ban plastic bags from all its 539 stores. As of January 2010, shoppers will receive their goods in a bag for life – either jute or cotton – or a paper carrier. These bags will all be cost neutral (99p for a large jute down to a couple of pennies for the paper version) and Holland & Barrett won't make a penny from the switch.

"Many retailers have introduced half measures such as charging for plastic bags in a bid to encourage their customers to shy away from using them," explains Aldis. "But in reality, no-one has stepped up to the mark and banned plastic bags all together, until now. We are the first high-street retailer to take this stand and I challenge the rest of the high street to follow us and move Britain a step closer to a total bag ban."

Interesting fact: Holland & Barrett's new line of jute and cotton bags will all be emblazoned with a blue butterfly motif. Why? Holland & Barrett has a long and respected history in conservationism. The high-street health food retailer has almost single handedly bankrolled the return from extinction of one of the world's rarest butterflies: the Large Blue. From zero butterflies in the eighties, some 20,000 Large Blue butterflies are now flourishing in the wild thanks to the project.