

# SAY NO TO PLASTIC BAGS

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THOSE most inclined to help save the earth, often feel like aliens in Singapore.

Nowhere is that more true than in the world of the supermarket check-out line – reportedly, a huge source of the more-than-one million plastic bags given away here daily.

“I feel like an ET (extra-terrestrial) each time I tell the cashier at the supermarket, ‘Please try to use as few bags as possible’,” TODAY reader Valerie Michelin says, plaintively.

Her feelings of being alone in the crowd are echoed by several others, who wrote in response to Lee U-Wen’s News Comment yesterday, “Is S’pore a nation of plastic bag junkies?”

Singaporean Winnie Foo, who takes along her own bags when shopping, says: “The staff at

the supermarkets look on in amazement (Or is it amusement?) as I help repack the groceries so as to use fewer bags.

“The grandma who sells me vegetables at the market always laughs and complains I don’t think her bags are good enough and probably thinks I am crazy when I leave a small bundle of used, clean rubber bands in her rubber band tray.”

The revelation of just how many plastic bags Singapore’s voracious population of four million consumes each year, shocked nearly 40 TODAY readers into writing in yesterday in support of cut-back measures.

Including what’s generated by factories as packaging material, the plastic bag count tops 40 billion a year – that’s 10,000 bags per person per year, or 27 bags per resident per day.

The good news seems to be, recycling campaigns have had at least some effect. Several years ago, shoppers who tried using their own cloth or jute bags for groceries reported getting stopped – even scolded – by retail staff.

The idea of having supermarkets charge for use of bio-degradable plastic bags has been bandied about before. But the management’s excuse was that customers would simply go to the competitor supplying free bags instead.

Going by the chorus of support from readers, is it time for supermarkets to do a re-think?

With more Singaporeans travelling overseas, more are being converted to the enlightened environmental policies practised in other countries.

Writing from Germany, Singaporean Adrian C notes it is common in many parts of Europe for shoppers to bring their own bags or baskets. “Initially, it

was a big hassle (for me) to do this, but this quickly becomes an easy habit.

When you understand the environmental reasons, it becomes a necessity, not merely some idealistic notions of a few intellectuals,” he said.

Say Kin Lee describes his surprise at finding out that convenience stores in Lijiang, China, do not use plastic bags, but issue cloth bags for purchases of a certain amount.

Indeed, Murali Kumara Sharma writes: “I am embarrassed that parts of India and Bangladesh have banned the use of plastic bags and we have yet to take the first step.”

So what can be done here? Ban plastic bags “too small to be re-used in a trash bin”, such as bags given out by book-stores or clothes shops, says Laura Gossage.

Make consumers pay for every bag they use. “Singaporeans are less interested in environmental solutions unless it either affects their pockets, or is enforced by Government policies,” says John Campen.

He suggests a 50-cent tax per bag, with the proceeds to “go to funding waterway clean-ups and other environmental programmes”.

Train check-out staff not to “so spontaneously offer so many bags”, says Michelin.

“Is it necessary to separate bread from eggs, or pens and notebooks and therefore give three bags that will end up in the rubbish bin 20 minutes later?”

Re-educate the shopper, who might otherwise accuse a plastic-prudent cashier of being “stingy”, says Chew Cheng Lai – and teach the “aunties”, who always ask for a few extra bags for the trash, to buy big garbage bags that hold a lot more.

Reward environmentally-conscious shoppers with discounts, or a chance at a lucky draw, suggests Edmund Lim Wee Kiat.

Or, inject “snob appeal”, with some marketing, into using one’s own wicker basket, suggests Narayana Narayana.

Start by educating the children, and through them, their parents, others say.

At the industry level, Campen suggests, levy a tax on product packaging as they do in Germany. “I have seen simple items with four levels of packaging. The more packaging, the more tax the manufacturer has to pay.”

Ultimately, if retailers are reluctant to take the first step, the Government must step in, many argue. As Chew says: “It is very difficult to kick the habit, unless it is mandatory ... Our society is so used to convenience, we do not think too much for the future generation.”

Is it time to make a start?

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