

NEWScomment

Is S'pore a nation of plastic bag junkies?

Its population of 4 million use a staggering one million bags a day, or 40 billion a year

Lee U-Wen
u-wen@newstoday.com.sg

IT'S FREE and it's handy. How else would we get our groceries home, and our lunches to the office? And what would we do if the bakery did not pack each bun in its own little plastic bag? For many of us, daily life without plastic bags would be unimaginable. And that's the problem.

In a massive clean-up of our local beaches and mangroves last September, the 2,000 over volunteers picked up more than 88,000 discarded items.

Plastic bags and containers accounted for nearly three-quarters of the rubbish.

The problem with plastic bags is that many get washed from drains into our coastal waters and swampy areas, posing a danger to marine life.

Many turtles and fish die from consuming plastic bags, as they are deceived with the bags' resemblance to jellyfish or squid.

Plastics also raise the mercury levels and toxins in fish, creating long-term health problems to those who end up eating the fish.

Campaigns to encourage the public to use less plastic bags have come and gone, with little impact.

Is it our *bochay* attitude rearing its ugly head again?

One awareness drive that the Singapore Environment Council (SEC) co-organised in December 2002 barely lasted a year, said a spokesman.

Meanwhile, the numbers are shocking: It's estimated that over a million plastic bags are given out a day and nearly 40 billion bags are used each year.

That works out to a staggering one thousand bags for each living person in Singapore.

By comparison, the United States, with a population of over

300 million, only goes through 100 billion plastic shopping bags each year.

Taiwan consumes 20 billion bags per year, or 900 per person. Australians use just 6.9 billion bags annually, a rate of just 326 per person.

Maybe it's time for Singapore to learn from other countries

There were also very few trash bins in the city, which I learnt was to encourage a habit of recycling and to help reduce the amount of rubbish collected.

Grocery stores in the US give shoppers the option to use plastic or paper bags, with check-out cashiers regularly encouraging the latter as they can be recycled easily.

Bringing your own bag has its perks too, as incentives like small discounts and rebate coupons are given in recognition of the customer's effort.

According to the SEC, there are bio-degradable plastic bags in Singapore, but these cost more and the consumer would have to pay for it.

The bio-degradable bags cost about four to five cents each, while the less environmentally-friendly bags cost about two cents each.

What can we do to reduce our over-dependence on plastic bags?

Should supermarkets and retail stores start charging for plastic bags?

This idea was bandied about several years ago but it drew a lot of flak from the public and was shelved as stores feared losing customers to competitors.

However, there are many countries that had bitten the bullet.

Switzerland, Denmark and South Africa have slapped fees on plastic bag usage, while Bangladesh and parts of India have banned them altogether.

Three years ago, Ireland began imposing a 15-cent tax on plastic bags, resulting in a 90-per-cent decrease in usage.

Perhaps, it is time for Singapore too, to try to kick the plastic bag habit?

If you would like to comment on this writer's views, please email us at news@newstoday.com.sg

PLASTIC BAG USAGE IN SELECTED COUNTRIES

	Population	No used/year
SINGAPORE	4 million	40 billion
UNITED STATES	300 million	100 billion
TAIWAN	23 million	20 billion
AUSTRALIA	20 million	7 billion

which have taken drastic measures to curb plastic bag usage.

During my first visit to Taiwan recently, I was taken aback to find that supermarkets and convenience stores charge NT\$2 (10 Singapore cents) for each plastic bag given out.

I saw that many customers brought their own cloth or paper bags to hold their purchases.

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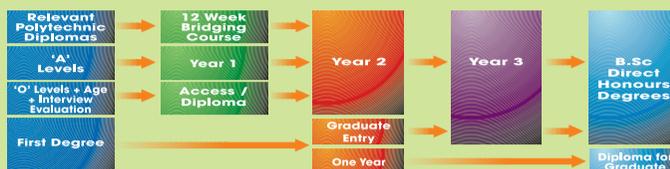
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