



# The Daily Gleaner

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## Why *not* plastic bags?

On Wednesday, April 22, 2009 people all around the world celebrated Earth Day. Atlantic Superstore celebrated by encouraging customers to use reusable bags by placing a 5-cent charge on each plastic bag used. Additionally, they offered 50 percent off the regular price of their reusable bags. I have to applaud this Earth Day action. As for me, it has been almost 18 years since I began using reusable grocery bags in my household.

Charging for plastic bags is certainly not a new idea and in fact, North America has been a bit slow out of the gate on this action. In fact, in several countries around the world, there have been full bans on plastic grocery bags. Some readers may be surprised to know that China implemented a ban in the summer of '08, claiming at the time that they would save 37 million barrels of crude oil on plastic bag production every year.

Being a product of petroleum, plastic bags have a vast detrimental impact on the environment from their very inception. The drilling of petroleum uses unprecedented amounts of water; it often destroys vast areas of ecosystems; and has other environmental risks, such as spills from ocean drilling. The actual production of plastic bags uses a great deal of energy, which not only emits climate changing CO2 emissions but also releases toxic chemicals into the air.

There is the argument that the standard reusable bags we see in most grocery stores use a lot of energy to produce as well. And indeed even though many of the reusable bags out there now are made from recycled materials; the process of breaking down recyclables itself consumes high amounts of energy, not to mention the greenhouse gases emitted from transporting these bags from their manufacturing site to their destination. So why not plastic bags?

Well, there are other environmental implications to think about. We've all seen plastic bags hanging from tree branches, blowing around our streets and sidewalks, and even in our waterways. It is distressing to imagine, but many sea and land animals and birds die every year by either ingesting plastic bags or getting caught up and asphyxiated by them. Furthermore billions of pounds of bags are ending up in our waste management systems, either directly into the landfill or to recycling. And even though recycling is a better option than landfill; it still consumes an incredible amount of energy both in processing and in transporting recyclables. Remember, of the 3 R's, 'Recycle' is still 3<sup>rd</sup> behind 'Reduce' and 'Reuse'!

If you are feeling uncertain, due to the fact that production of reusable bags still equates to mass energy consumption, you can look around locally. There are many local entrepreneurs making reusable cloth bags now, which can be used for all your shopping needs. Some large companies are even looking to have local suppliers customize reusable bags for them rather than transporting them from thousands of miles away. And don't forget, even though energy is consumed during the production and transportation

cycle for reusable bags, we need to remember the pay off. Reusable bags can be used for many years, so their environmental footprint is naturally smaller than plastic bags (which rip or tear after several uses), in that the energy consumed in producing and transporting them is stretched out over these many years of use.

I remember when we bought our first cloth bags in Red Deer, Alberta where I attended arts college. I think we used the same bags for at least 5 years before we finally retired them, and even then we cut them up to use as household rags. I know that everyone who reads my columns knows by now that I am a strong believer in “one person can make a difference” and “doing something big or small accomplishes more than doing nothing”; so I wonder how many plastic bags my small household of two has saved over the past 18 years? Let’s see, approximately four bags once per week by 52 weeks for 17 years...3536 bags! That’s enough evidence right there to answer the question: “Why not plastic bags?”.

*Valerie Hillier is a Frederictonian who challenges us to change our habits for environmental reasons. If you have topics you’d like to see the Green Matters writers present in this column please e-mail us at [greenmatters@fredericton.ca](mailto:greenmatters@fredericton.ca).*