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Plastic bagging

Bans on useful shopping bags are wasteful and pointless, writes **Matthew Warren**

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IN the hairshirt fashion houses of modern environment policy there are many labels but few emblems. In the 1980s it was nuclear disarmament. In the '90s it was recycling. But for true retail environmentalism, these days it's hard to go past the plastic bag.

If black is the new black, plastic bags are the new cause celebre. In seemingly Orwellian fashion they are now no longer just a couple of grams of super-convenient plastic, but stand accused of killing marine wildlife in their hundreds of thousands, wreaking havoc across the oceans and choking our rivers, zoos and possibly even troubling our livestock.

Apparently they are everywhere in their ubiquitous billions. Plastic bags have become an emergency that must be stopped.

In July the Victorian Government announced just that. Describing them as "a symbol of our inefficient use of resources", the Government banned free plastic bags from 2009, a headline act in its 90-page sustainability action statement.

The statement claimed about 10 million of these shopping bags "become litter that endanger the health of marine wildlife, damage property through clogged drains and machinery and detract from the beauty of our environment".

"Giving consumers incentives and stronger choices to 'say no to plastic bags' is a way we can all contribute to environmental sustainability - in itself a small action but important in developing a more sustainable culture in Victoria."

The action may indeed be small but the impact of such a ban certainly has not been. What the Victorian statement conveniently excluded was the evidence before the Government before its announcement that such a ban would be every bit as wasteful as the bags themselves.

In May, the Productivity Commission released its much anticipated draft report on waste generation and resource efficiency in Australia. In this report it warned that enforcing bans on plastic bags must be based on rigorous cost-benefit analysis.

In plainer words, the commission said if a government imposed the largely hidden costs of this kind of blunt regulation, then it needed to demonstrate that such costs were worth it, and that the action taken was the most effective and efficient way of achieving the stated objective.

A year earlier, all environment ministers in Australia - the Environment Protection and Heritage Council - had commissioned just such analysis. Respected economists Allen Consulting reported back to them in June, and the numbers on a ban didn't look good.

The report found that even with generous definitions of environmental hazard for plastic bags, the cost of imposing various types of bans and other similar mechanisms was still about four times greater than the environmental benefit.

They estimated the cost of a national ban would be as high as \$1.4 billion over 10 years through a range of retail costs including slower checkouts and other indirect costs borne by retailers. These are effectively the same as a tax on consumers as retailers pass the costs on in higher prices.

The key point made in the report was not that nothing should be done to address the environmental impacts that plastic bag litter might cause, but that banning all or most bags to target the estimated 0.8 per cent of bags causing the problem was a pretty brutal and indirect way of going about it, like banning all cars to cut air pollution.

It is hardly surprising, then, that a number of state governments reportedly fought to block the release of the Allen report, which

was finally released to the public in September.

Under increasing pressure from government, retailers eventually introduced a voluntary program to reduce plastic bag use and began selling the lurid green polypropylene reusable bags with considerable success, cutting bag use by 46 per cent in three years. This was only just shy of the agreed 50 per cent target by 2005, but clearly not good enough for the Victorian Government.

Victorian Opposition spokesman David Davis estimates the Victorian ban will cost \$106 million a year. "Instead of advancing the co-operative approach the state Government has chosen to use a powerful stick that will add costs for consumers," he says.

Despite his concerns, the political cache of being tough on plastic bags was undeniable: "We didn't oppose the bill but we did express great doubt about this aspect."

The Victorian ban had no regulatory impact statement, no supporting evidence that the move was based on anything more than green political opportunism.

The scientific evidence of the environmental impact of plastic bags is mostly anecdotal and flagrantly thin. The seminal report in Australia was completed in 2002 and is, by its own admission, based in many parts on nothing more than educated guesses simply because of the vacuum of credible, documented science.

Plastic bags have two environmental impacts: the resources used to make them; and their impact in the litter stream. Each bag weights about 2g, but like an ant can carry more than a thousand times its weight.

Because they are so light they make a relatively tiny dent on landfill and resource use: only about 0.2 per cent of solid waste in Australia. A typical car return trip to a supermarket consumes about the same energy as nearly 100 bags.

On the litter side the claims are more outrageous. Environmental branding and marketing company Planet Ark has been one of the primary megaphones of the "plastic bags are evil" message, claiming they kill at least 100,000 birds, whales, seals and turtles every year. This claim, which has been proudly recycled by politicians and activists across Australia, is based on a single

study - from Canada, more than 20 years ago.

Planet Ark director Jon Dee claims to have countless anecdotes of landfills hiring people to pick up plastic bags, farmers complaining about their livestock dying from plastic bags and negative reports from zoos, wildlife rescuers and litter groups. He has even seen the footage of a Bryde's whale that died on the beach near Cairns in 2000 after reportedly ingesting 6cum of plastic.

"It's nearly impossible to measure how big the problem is," he says.

He's right, but without the exclamation mark. The more sober independent study from 2002 had this to say about such reports: "Actual numbers of animals injured or killed annually by plastic bag litter is obviously nearly impossible to determine. Despite this lack of reliable data, the potential for plastic shopping bags to injure marine wildlife is real and of a high concern to Australians. Measures to reduce the littering of bags, other plastic film and other packaging should be a high priority."

Reducing the risk of such a hazard to ocean wildlife and other animals is an agreed and noble idea. That's not the problem. The vacuum of credible data allows a near hysterical debate to rage, which risks distorting policy from problem.

There is no reliable data on the total size of the litter stream in Australia. For the purpose of the exercise, the consultants made an educated guess that between 50 and 80million plastic bags end up as litter annually. Truth is they have no idea.

The bags come from a variety of sources including bags blown from landfills, bags re-used in public places and then left behind, and bags inadvertently littered from places such as street bins. This is curious because the proposed Victorian ban from 2009 targets bags from supermarkets but proposes exemptions for small retailers. The places where most of the at-litter-risk bags are likely to be coming from will be exempted from the ban, while those at low risk will be targeted.

What this research actually flags is that the trouble with plastic bags is they are a victim of their own success. They are light, strong, versatile be it as a bin liner, temporary storage device or

dog's poop scooper.

Because the bags are so versatile, households continue to store them rather than discard them. About 60 per cent of bags are estimated to be re-used before disposal.

Most councils will not accept them in kerbside recycling systems because they can only be recycled if packed in tight with 100 other plastic bags and not wrapped conveniently around wine bottles and milk cartons.

And so they continue to breed in kitchen-sink cupboards across the country. Tim Grant from the Centre for Design at RMIT University thinks most households respond more to the immediate sense of waste in their homes than have some greater awareness of potential risk to marine wildlife.

"People are coming from that resource aspect rather than being overly concerned about litter," he says.

Federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell thinks the voluntary approach has been working and believes Australians and their state governments should persist with it. He would also like to see the development of degradable bags to further reduce the littering of plastic bags rather than a mix of populist state taxes, bans and levies.

"We should be very proud of what we have achieved with a voluntary approach and just keep the momentum going. The practical way to get plastic bags out of the litter stream is to replace them with a degradable alternative," Campbell says.

"If I had a billion dollars to spend over the next 10 years I'd rather spend it on climate change than on a more marginal environmental issue like plastic bags. We have limited resources in this country and we need a rational debate on this sort of issue that considers all the costs and benefits."

Degradable bags sound a great solution, but there are complications. First, the bags are still resource-intensive. Second, there are discrete types of degradation - in water, in the earth and in sunlight. If marine wildlife is the primary concern then water-degrading bags may be best suited, while reducing land-born litter would favour light-degrading bags. One size does not

fit all.

Clean Up Australia chairman Ian Kiernan also supports a continuation of the existing voluntary approach, which has delivered a significant reduction in plastic bag use through effective community engagement.

"To then go and whack a 10c levy on them and punish them is not equitable," he says.

Other state governments, including NSW and South Australia, are looking at similar measures to Victoria's, with the issue to be revisited at the next EPHC meeting in November.

A spokesman for NSW Environment Minister Bob Debus says considering the different cost options to reduce plastic bags is "part of the debate we have to have" about plastic bag management. "We know that there is strong feeling in the community for a reduction in plastic bag use," the spokesman says.

The Victorian bans are big on political symbolism but dangerously thin on actually addressing the problems at hand. A more considered approach might have looked at more direct strategies that specifically addressed the main environmental threats of plastic bags for a much lower cost. After all, that's what cost-benefit means.

Australia faces a wide range of serious environmental challenges. Climate change, water management and the continued protection of biodiversity are chief among them. The plastic bag problem sits in the shallow end. It remains an issue anchored in symbolism and amplified by its physical tangibility to the public rather than the scale of its environmental impact.

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