

Earth Day Plastic Bag Awareness

Trash plastic bags for
Earth Day
MARIO BARTEL/NEWSLEADER

Mike Suh, of the Green Ideas Network, has his arms full of plastic shopping bags, while Joyce Rostron shows off a more environmentally-friendly way to bring home the groceries, a canvas tote. They're trying to encourage people to reuse their plastic bags and local businesses to offer discounts to shoppers who supply their own bags.

By Wanda Chow Burnaby NewsLeader

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Plastic bags be gone.

Or at the very least, significantly reduced. That's one of the goals of the Green Ideas Network, a Burnaby-based non-profit group that is trying to find ways people can live in a sustainable manner, with the least impact on the environment.

Its president, Doreen Dewell of South Surrey, started the group a couple of months ago with her sister, Joyce Rostron, who lives in Edmonds in Burnaby.

Their first project, to mark Earth Day today (Saturday), is to try and convince people to use fewer plastic bags. To that end, they're encouraging businesses to offer five-cent rebates when customers bring their own bags when shopping. Reducing the use of plastic bags is something simple people can do and it can make a difference, Dewell said.

Those ubiquitous plastic bags may look harmless, but with billions used around the world, their impact can add up.

For one thing, plastics are actually a petroleum product and therefore use a non-renewable resource, fossil fuels, Dewell said. While theoretically they can be recycled, very few ever are, partly because it's difficult to find a place that accepts them for recycling. People just don't do it.

Plastics in general also have a fairly complex chemical composition so it can take hundreds of years or more to decompose in landfills.

To make matters worse, plastic bags are often guilty of killing birds and marine animals. A sea turtle can mistake them for jellyfish, she said. Once they're eaten, the bags block their digestive tracts and the turtles die. Some birds have also been known to feed smaller bits of plastic bags to their chicks, mistaking them for food and killing their chicks in the process.

Plastic bags have also been known to clog drains. In Bangladesh, for example, existing severe flooding conditions are only exacerbated by the bags blocking drains, Dewell said.

In fact, some countries have either put a tax on every bag used (Ireland) or banned the bags altogether (some states in India).

Dewell doesn't have a problem with people reusing plastic bags as garbage bags but notes that most people end up bringing home far more than they could ever use. To cut that back, she suggests people either bring their own bags when shopping or buy a cloth bag specifically for that purpose.

For businesses, they may not charge customers for them, but the bags do cost them money which is ultimately passed on to the prices of their products.

So far they've got one Edmonds business on board for their five-cent rebate project, Bernie's Lunch & Deli at 7340 Kingsway.

Environmental change is in the hands of the consumer, said Dewell. In fact, I think this is the only way change can happen. The consumer calls the shots.

She noted that by using fewer plastic bags people are simply going back to the way things used to be done. Plastic bags have only been around for 50 years. Society got along without them for a very long time.

It's just something really small people can do. It may not seem like much but it all adds up.