The Guardian ‘Environment’

World asks town that banned the plastic bag: how can we do it too?

Traders and customers say boycott will stay after six-month experiment

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Saturday 12 May 2007 23.57 BST

Sandra Beard didn't stand a chance. Net curtains twitched. Shoppers tutted. The holidaymaker had advanced a mere 50 yards down Modbury high street before Helen Pickles burst out of her shop looking askance.

"Madam," the joint proprietor of R&H Pickles hardware trilled at Mrs Beard, "is that a plastic bag you're carrying?"

Two weeks after becoming the first town in Europe to ban plastic bags from its shops, an extraordinary transformation has taken place in the south Devon community. Carrying a plastic bag has become antisocial behaviour.

Wicker baskets, rucksacks and reusable bags of every shape and size swing from the arms of shoppers in the bustling town of 1,500 people. But if you're spotted with a plastic one you risk becoming a social pariah.

"I had to rescue one lady because she was walking down the road with a plastic bag and her friends were saying 'you can't be seen in Modbury with a plastic bag'," said Rebecca Hosking, 33, a wildlife camerawoman who came up with the idea in a local pub one evening.

"I ran out of my flat and said, 'it's OK, she's reusing it, she's allowed to bring it into the town'."

From the butchers to the Co-op supermarket, none of the town's 43 traders uses plastic bags. The 2,000 special edition Modbury bags made from fair trade recycled cotton are already a collectors' item; stores also sell 5p biodegradable cornstarch bags, biodegradable bin bags and even biodegradable bags for dog mess.

There is one plastic bag left in town and it is so rare it has a name - "the granny's knickers" - and has become the subject of earnest debate as it hangs from an oak tree by the car park. It won't foil the residents for long. Modburians have a talent for environmental problem solving.

Unlike fashionable Totnes nearby, Modbury is not a beacon for alternative lifestyles. "It's a horsy, farmy town that's always been very conservative," said Ms Hosking. "If we've done it, it proves you don't have to be one of those 'green' towns to change over."

Their plastic bag ban was not the result of years of campaigning. Ms Hosking suggested it in the pub one evening in March shortly after filming a BBC documentary about the devastating effect of plastic bags on marine life in Hawaii. She showed the film to the town's traders. Four weeks of sleepless nights researching viable alternatives followed and plastic bag-free status began on May 1.

Since then, she has fielded thousands of calls from shoppers and traders across the world wanting to follow Modbury's lead. More than 60 towns in the UK, including 15 in Devon and Cornwall, have approached her for help. International media has swarmed there; several celebrities desperate to "endorse" Modbury's action have been politely rebuffed.

Ms Hosking says she sometimes feels like Brian from Monty Python's Life of Brian. There is certainly a messianic glint in proud locals' eyes when they talk about the ban. "It's fabulous," said Anne Tillett, wielding a flowery blue bag. "I popped into a supermarket in another town yesterday and because I hadn't planned ahead I didn't have my bag and I just couldn't take a plastic bag. I've become a missionary."

Adam Searle used to hand out 200 plastic bags every day. His deli is busier than ever but he barely uses two cornstarch bags a day. "I don't think I'll get through my biodegradable bags before they biodegrade," he said. "You have a couple of awkward people who go 'it's a load of rubbish' and you explain what it's about and they pat you on the back."

It is impossible to find a cynic or contrarian even among outsiders.

Holidaymakers Terry and Gill Lodge were oblivious to the revolution in Modbury until they went shopping. They didn't bat an eyelid about buying a reusable bag. "Bloody marvellous," said Mr Lodge. "In Salisbury we always shop in Waitrose and their plastic bags are so flimsy that you put them in the boot of your car and they fall to pieces. Not satisfactory at all."

"The sooner we get rid of plastic bags and packaging the better," added Mrs Lodge.

Ms Hosking could easily make her fortune as a plastic bag guru but wants to get back to her day job - filming buzzards. Towns that keep asking her for "a manual" on how to do it need to look closer to home.

"It has to come from residents and from the community," she said.

Billed as a six-month experiment, townsfolk are adamant there will be no turning back. It received no funding or council intervention but Modbury was helped by its preponderance of independent traders. Only the Co-op supermarket was part of a chain and it has been an enthusiastic supporter.

But Ms Hosking reckons it is still possible for towns with big chain stores. "The supermarkets have two options - they can come with you and all the town looks good or they look bad when the whole town bans bags and they don't."

Back on the high street, Mrs Beard and her friend, Rose Rogers, were expecting that tap on the shoulder. "Before we went on holiday, my son said 'plastic bags are banned in Modbury. Mind you don't get arrested walking down the street with one'," said Mrs Rogers. But Mrs Beard was not offended by her interrogation. "My plastic bag is recycled," she said. "I always carry one around in my handbag."

Cutting down

· 17bn plastic bags a year are given to British consumers. The average Briton accepts five a week.

· Anya Hindmarch launched the limited edition £5 I'm Not A Plastic Bag this year. It has been criticised by some because it was made in China, but Hindmarch said they were careful to carbon offset the project and the intent was not to make a profit but "cast a spotlight on the issue".

· Taiwan is prohibiting not only plastic bags, but also disposable plastic plates, cups and cutlery used by fast food vendors. Threat of fines of up to £152 have resulted in a 70% reduction in the use of plastic bags, and a 25% cut in landfill waste.

· Ireland's 15p "plastax" on carrier bags, introduced in 2002, has led to a 90% reduction in use.

· In France, reusable plastic bags - heavier, easier to recycle and less likely to blow away - now account for more than half of the market.

· In 2002 Bangladesh became the first country to ban plastic bags. A movement against them began in the 1980s in Dhaka, where bags were found to clog drains in the monsoon rains, causing flooding.

· San Francisco has become the first US city to ban plastic bags. The ban will be enforced later this year.

Isabelle Chevallot

Answer the following questions

1. Suggest reasons why plastic bags are bad for the environment.
2. In what ways is it possible to decrease the use of plastic bags?

c) What is the evidence to suggest that the use of plastic bags can be reduced?

d) (i) Create a survey of the use of plastic bags by members in school. How many plastic bags are people given during a week? How could this be reduced?

(ii) What other forms of plastic could be reduced?

e. Compare and contrast human pollution in a LEDC vs MEDC