

Should plastic bags
be banned?



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Plastic shopping bags are very cheap, useful and convenient: Should they be banned?

Introduction

Universally, individuals and groups continue to advocate for the banning of plastic shopping bags, proposing that they be replaced with reusable biodegradable bags. Due to their synthetic nature, plastics are considered pollutants by critics. However, they are also very cheap, useful and convenient and a complete ban will have a significant negative economic impact for retailers, states and consumers. Both critics and advocates for the ban of plastic shopping bags have been outspoken, with each side presenting objective arguments to support their cause. By analysing the advantages and disadvantages of plastic shopping bags, the report attempts to examine the prospective economic, environmental and even social impacts that a ban on plastic could have in society. A realistic assessment based on objective studies will be critical in presenting an accurate evaluation of the plastic ban and will be helpful to all stakeholders involved.

Background

Ever since the emergence of plastics in the 1940s, they have grown to become extremely popular for consumers and industrial entities. Even in the 21st Century, the volume of plastic being manufactured annually continues to rise with the total production volume in the first decade of the century equalling the entire 20th Century's production. An estimated 260 million tons of plastics are currently being produced annually for different purposes worldwide (Clapp and Swanston, 2009). Plastic shopping bags, defined as recyclable high-density polyethylene bags, are designed to be used only

once. The increase in retail shopping and the emergence of retail venues in the 1970s led to the exponential increase in the popularity of plastic bags. Research by Clapp and Swanston (2009) indicate that plastic bags are the most popular grocery bag of choice for consumers worldwide.

Estimates indicate that between 600 billion and 1.5 trillion plastic bags are used yearly around the world (Luis and Spinola, 2010). Plastics shopping bags are manufactured when fossil fuels are converted into polymers.

Plastics are considered exceptionally durable and strong, an aspect that is counterproductive since it accounts for its negative properties. It is estimated that it takes between 400 and 1,000 years for a thin plastic to be broken down, hence they are considered a threat to the environment (Thompson, Moore, ComSaal, and Swan, 2009). Existing literature indicates that most citizens favour recycling rather than a complete ban of plastics. Surveys indicate that the majority of shoppers reuse plastic bags at least once (Ellis, Kantner, Saab and Watson, 2005).

Current Situation

The calls for a complete ban arise from the primary concerns associated with plastic shopping bags. The first concern is that plastics create a waste stream that is extremely difficult to eliminate or manage. Research carried out by the California Integrated Waste Management Board revealed that plastics of all kinds comprise an estimated 10% of the state's disposable waste stream. A further estimated 0.3% and 0.13% of the total waste stream were plastic bags and plastic shopping bags respectively (Delaney & Madigan, 2014). Plastic bags are also known to litter with different studies revealing that, of all the total litter collected in the world, between 1 and 5

percent are from plastic bags. In the US alone, consumers use a whopping 100 billion plastic bags annually, with a large proportion of this eventually becoming litter (Delaney & Madigan, 2014).

Another critical cause for apprehension is that plastic bags take a very long time to disintegrate. Research show that plastic bags can last for as long as 1, 000 years, with the vast majority of this life cycle being within the end of life phase either as litter or in a landfill (Freinkel, 2011). The extensive lifespan results from its immunity to biodegradation, hence they can only photo degrade over very long time periods releasing toxic additives in the process which also pollute the ecosystem. A plastic bag's lifecycle has also been noted for being greenhouse gas intensive since fossil fuels are the primary compounds used during their production. There have also been concerns about the effect of plastic bags on marine pollution. An assessment carried out by the United States Environmental Program (UNEP) revealed that an estimated 80% of all marine debris come from a land source of which 60%-80% are plastics (Delaney & Madigan, 2014). Plastic marine debris exists in almost all the regions of the world, hence it has created global pollution problems. Plastic directly affects more than 660 species of animals including fish, birds, turtles and a group of marine mammals (Bean, 2013). When the animals confuse the bags for food, their digestive tracks become blocked, a development which may eventually cause death. According to San Francisco marine officials, a study in which 370 autopsies were carried out found one in every three dead leatherback turtles to have some form of plastics in their stomachs (Bean, 2013).

Call for Bans

The documented undesirable effects of the plastic bags have led a number of individuals and groups to lobby for a worldwide ban on them. Studies show that even though the majority believed that consumer education would improve the situation, they have not achieved a significant reduction in single use bag consumption. According to Ellis, Kantner, Saab and Watson (2005), education campaigns have only led to a 5% decrease in voluntary plastic bag usage. As a result, certain nations have created mandatory ordinances to limit the use of plastic bags. In the United States for example, 17 states have ordinances that place bans and limitations on the use and distribution of plastic bags.

Essentially, bans can be designed in various means although it will depend on how it reduces plastic bag use, limiting the overall environmental damage, the overall economic impact on consumers, manufacturers and retailers and the legislation's ability to reduce plastic bag use (The Economist, 2007). A number of variables that may be considered when imposing a ban include the types of bags to be banned, whether or not to include a fee, promoting the use of alternative paper, attaching an amount to the specific type of bags, or specifying the type of bags to be used. Other variables should include the types and sizes of retail venues that the ban can affect, ordinance exemption and incentives that will enforce the ordinance such as fees or fines that accompany non-compliance (Clapp and Swanston, 2009).

Potential Impacts of Plastic Bag Ban

Economists and environmentalists have identified a number of potential economic impacts on the ban of plastics. A ban has the capacity of reducing the volume of plastic bags used in retail outlets. However, this will vary and can only be determined by customer feedback, retail venue feedback, analyses of baggage records, analysis of the disposition of waste stream and observational studies. A ban of plastic bags may be successful especially if retailers are subjected to charge customers for plastic bags as a measure for overall reduction. Using the case of Ireland which has achieved a 90% reduction in the use of plastic paper bags, it was evident that the initiation of a national fee served that purpose well (Sugii, 2008).

A considerable environmental impact will also result from the ban of plastic paper bags if customers are subjected to pay for the use of the bags. The imposition of a complete ban or a fee for the usage will significantly reduce the environmental impact of plastic paper bag use. A complete ban on plastic paper bag may, however, be difficult to impose although it is estimated that this would result in between a 93% and 96% reduction in the reported environmental impacts. The goal should, therefore, be a step-by-step transition from the use of plastic bags to reusable bags so as to limit the eventual economic impact of plastics (Hasson, Leiman, and Visser, 2007).

Economic Impact on Retailers

A complete ban of plastic shopping bags or even a transition to other reusable bag types will have multiple economic effects. The effects will not only be on plastic manufacturers, but consumers, retailers and even entire cities and states will be affected. Retailers will be some of the worst affected

entities with a ban on plastic shopping bags since in nearly all countries of the world, they offer them to customers at no charge. Although retailers purchase the bags at minimal costs, they are cost effective and can be charged on the retailer's expense account. Retailers will still need to package goods for their customers in some way and the cost associated with alternative bags will be significantly greater for retailers.

Retailers may also opt to sell the alternative paper bags to customers, a development which may be sustainable in the long run. Although in the short run retailers may suffer a loss due to the increase in the usage of paper bags, the loss can be mitigated if consumers start paying for their own reusable bags. Retailers may lose business if customers take their business elsewhere, especially when the ban is selective (Ellis, Kantner, Saab and Watsonm 2005). It is further documented that research from areas in which plastic bags were banned demonstrated a considerable decrease in sales. This is, however, disputable since the methodology used and the sample size of the study was relatively minimal and restricted within the boundaries of the Los Angeles County.

Economic Impact to Consumers and Plastic Manufacturers

A ban on plastic shopping bags would have a significant impact on consumers, since at present the bags are given free to consumers. However, a study by the United Nations Environmental Program revealed that plastic shopping bags are not actually free, but cost every household between \$10 and \$15 annually (Hasson, Leiman, and Visser, 2007). In order to estimate the potential economic impact that a ban on plastics could have on consumers, it is imperative to consider the price for the alternative reusable

and paper bags. Although reusable bags are relatively costly, customers may actually save costs eventually since reusable bags are more durable and are designed to last for many years. Customers can even replace reusable stock a number of times further saving cost instead of paying recurring fees for paper bags (Hasson, Leiman, and Visser, 2007).

Bans on plastic paper bags will also have a significant impact on plastic manufacturers since a significant proportion of their business is based on the domestic segment. A number of plastic manufacturers have aggressively opposed any proposed bans or measures to restrict the use of plastic bags. Although most of the manufacturers produce a wide variety of products, it is evident that any bans on plastic shopping bags will significantly hinder the companies' revenue streams. Clapp and Swanston (2009) however argue that plastic bag manufacturing companies can mitigate the loss in business by switching to other product lines, such as the manufacture of reusable bags. Ellis, Kantner, Saab and Watsonm (2005) argue that it is not the shopping bag plastic manufactures that will lose, but the actual loss will be incurred by the larger plastic producers.

Analysis and Conclusion

Multiple arguments to support an opposition of the ban of plastics have been presented by opponents. According to Freinkel (2011), there is no need to ban plastics since the proportion of litter resulting from plastic shopping bag is too small to justify a total ban. He further argues that the ecological litter impact of plastic shopping bags, when quantified, is quite insignificant. A ban of the use of plastic paper bags could also cause significant job loses within the plastics manufacturing industry. Nonetheless, it has been argued that <https://assignbuster.com/should-plastic-bags-be-banned/>

the job loses can be compensated when a number of businesses emerge to fill the need for reusable bags.

Based on the analysis, the best option is to create measures with the objective of reducing the use of plastic shopping bags rather than implementing a complete ban. Even though there exists substantial literature documenting the environmental impact of banning plastic shopping bag, assessing the economic impact remains challenging. It is evident that a complete ban of the use of plastic shopping bags would affect a number of players within the plastic industry. Both retailers and consumers may be negatively affected in the short term as a result of an increase in baggage costs, but it is projected to decrease whenever a transition to reusable bags is effected. The plastic industry will, however, suffer even though plastic manufacturers can begin producing reusable bags.

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