OPA

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MISSED OPPORTUNITY

It is a sad fact of life that many politicians wishing to bolster their argument, tend to use statistics or in this case unscientific rhetoric, like drunks use lampposts – for support, rather than illumination.

Sometimes, as in the case of Tacoma City Council making the decision to ban plastic grocery bags, it is in the misguided belief that this is what the electorate want or need, because it certainly isn't a decision based on scientific evidence. See http://www.biodeg.org/bagbansandtaxes.html

A little research would have revealed that plastic bags, especially oxo-biodegradable (controlled-life) plastic bags are better for the environment than paper and/or cotton, jute or plastic re-usable bags. See http://www.biodeg.org/lifecycleassessments.html

Paper bags are more expensive to produce and worse for the environment because their manufacture uses a lot of energy and produces noxious chemicals. Paper bags are also thinner, disintegrate when wet, and are unsuitable to be re-used around the home.

Re-usable cotton, jute or plastic bags do not fare much better because they are very rarely if ever, washed and have been found to harbour dangerous germs including E.coli and Salmonella. They also usually end up in landfill, which cancels out the possible gains.

The sensible answer to the problem of plastic waste would be to legislate to ensure that plastic bags are made from newer technology. Oxo-biodegradable (controlled-life) plastic (see www.d2w.net) is conventional polyolefin plastic to which has been added small amounts of salts which cause the plastic, at the end of its useful life to degrade and biodegrade in months rather than years, on land or sea, leaving nothing behind, no toxic residues or fragments of plastic.

Better still, if collected during its useful life it can be recycled together with conventional plastic, see http://www.biodeg.org/recycling.html but crucially, if it escapes collection and ends up in the open environment it will not be around for decades. Instead it will change into a non-toxic, biodegradable material which can be bio-assimilated by microorganisms in the terrestrial or marine environments in the same way as natures waste only quicker.

Legislating for controlled-life plastic is not only an environmentally beneficial course of action, but also an economically sound decision and it represents a no-change solution. The bag or packaging can be made in existing plastic factories with existing workforce and machinery at little or no extra cost, thus safeguarding jobs in the plastics industry and giving consumers what they need without the associated environmental problem.

Life cycle assessments have shown that oxo-biodegradable, controlled-life plastic is more environmentally friendly than vegetable-based plastic, paper and cotton re-usable bags when land use, water, fertilizers, energy, transport and emissions are all factored in.

To ban or not to ban is a problem exercising the minds of many politicians and governments around the world, especially as much of the plastic discarded on land finds its way into the oceans.

Of course we need to collect and recycle as much plastic as possible and educate and encourage consumers to be more responsible with plastic waste, but we also need to be smarter in the type of plastic we use. Switching to controlled-life plastic will ensure that less plastic accumulates on land, which means less plastic finding its way into the oceans.

Several countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East have already legislated to make controlled-life plastic mandatory, because it works. It offers a practical solution to a difficult problem, which can be implemented right now. If Tacoma City Council members wanted to do the right thing for the environment and for their citizens, legislating for this technology would be a great way to start.

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