

No longer rapt in plastic

By Ruth Ostrow

ONE of the more memorable pictures I have in my mind is a sight I witnessed on my first trip to India. We were in Rajasthan, up near the Thar desert that borders Pakistan. We were driving on the road to Jaisalmer, which is a romantic fort city built of intricate sandstone.

The town is exquisite but the drive there is famously long and monotonous, the landscape dusty and dry. Suddenly, looming out of the arid vista, was a most beautiful spectacle -- or so I thought. A huge tree full of colourful flowers.

Look, I said, growing excited. It's amazing. The flowers are red, orange, pink and even blue! And purple, blurted my husband in awe. But as the car got closer we saw what was really in that tree. A hundred plastic bags of different hues, caught in the branches after a blustering wind had blown them there.

It was one of the more bizarre moments of our trip. During the rest of the journey we realised that much of what we thought were clusters of flowers in the sand were indeed more plastic bags rolling like tumbleweeds through the landscape.

In the villages and cities of India, cows eat the plastic bags and die. The waterways become clogged with them. On my most recent visit I noticed moves were afoot to get them banned from national parks and places of national importance.

After witnessing the horror of all that plastic pollution, I determined to do my best to halt the unconscious usage of Australia's own white poison on my return home. I began taking several hessian bags to the supermarket, only to discover that at the end of a busy shop, with a family to feed, I had often underestimated our needs. There would be another 10 bagfuls of groceries sitting on the counter.

Then there was the problem of fruit and vegies that needed to be put in plastic to be weighed. Without support or alternatives from stores, it was feeling like an uphill battle. I rationalised that we did need some plastic bags to put our garbage in.

So each week, probably like most Australians, I've been feeling guilty about my family's plastic bag consumption, thinking of the landfills we are leaving our children, clogging Mother Earth with plastic that will last hundreds of years, and polluting our oceans.

According to environmental group Planet Ark, despite the fact alternatives such as calico or string bags are available, people keep using plastic bags. Sometimes people find it hard to break a habit voluntarily, out of their concern for the environment alone.

At the moment, 20 million Australians are using 6 billion plastic bags a year -- half of which are checkout bags, according to Jon Dee, founder of Planet Ark, which is leading the campaign against plastic bags. That's 12,000 bags a minute - - a figure that needs to be substantially reduced, he says on the group's website. The website says that after community education programs failed to make an adequate difference in Ireland, the Irish government decided to give shoppers a financial incentive to cut their use of plastic bags.

In early 2002, a E0.15 levy was placed on plastic supermarket checkout bags. People now had to pay for them. This scheme saw a 90 per cent reduction in plastic bag use in Ireland in the scheme's first five months and raised \$6 million for environmental projects.

Now, here on our shores, there's finally a growing consciousness around the demon household convenience. The federal and state governments, supermarket chains and bag manufacturers have begun discussing ways to curb this ecological menace, such as compulsory recycling of plastic bags, making bags from biodegradable material and an Irish-style consumer tax.

The town of Coles Bay in Tasmania has just declared itself a plastic-bag-free zone and in Byron Bay initiatives are underfoot to do the same. Several shops are asking customers for donations for their biodegradable plastic bags. Some have gone back to cardboard boxes. My local shop is offering large, sturdy paper bags. It was difficult trying this option. It meant carrying the paper bags into my car two at a time rather than carrying five bags in each hand. But the effort made me feel proud.

However, the bottom fell out of my pleasure when I tried to recycle the paper bags for garbage disposal. I was left picking up soggy tissues, wet teabags and orange peel all the way to the wheelie bin.

There does need to be a two-pronged approach to the problem of plastic bags that encompasses the disposal end. For instance, nearby Lismore Council has a kerb-side rubbish collection service for food and paper products, which are taken straight to a composting farm, leaving less messy items to be thrown directly into the wheelie bin.

There are many options to examine over time. For the moment, it's wonderful to be given an opportunity to experiment and explore new ways to save our planet from the ugliness that is destroying its soul.

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