

News

Bag ban is more about greed than going green

KEITH WOODS 886 words 9 May 2018 Gold Coast Bulletin GCBULL GoldCoast 14 English

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I'M not especially old, except perhaps to my kids, but I can still just about remember a time when milk was delivered in glass bottles with foil lids.

Plenty of people will tell you the milk tasted creamier then. They're not imagining it, it did.

Every beverage tastes better from glass rather than plastic. Try offering someone a beer from a glass or a plastic cup and see what happens.

The milko would take the glass bottles away, to be washed and refilled, ready to create another creamy moustache on a cheeky young mouth.

Today milk is almost exclusively sold in plastic containers, no longer delivered to the doorstep but instead to the furthest reaches of your local supermarket. Why is it always at the back? Shop bosses know it's a daily staple, so want to ensure you pass the full range of their so-called "special" offers to reach it.

This, my friends, is "progress".

I don't recall it, but I'm told there was a time when fresh vegetables were similarly delivered.

Now they too are mostly also only available in supermarkets. There are some fruit and veggie stores left, but they are shrinking in number. My local store closed just a couple of weeks ago.

Instead, veggies too are increasingly delivered to us behind a veil of plastic. We have surely reached some kind of peak slovenliness when you realise that Woolworths now sells carrots sealed tightly in plastic, presented in stick form because the simple task of peeling and slicing is supposedly beyond our wits. It's called "Just Veg". No it's not, it's plastic too.

And this passes for "progress".

There are many more examples. Friendly, knowledgeable butchers are on the endangered list, and in their stead would come the shrink-wrapped, sorry cuts populating supermarket shelves.

Butter, once wrapped in paper, is now mostly sold in plastic tubs. Juice, water and fizzy drinks, sold in glass as late as the 1980s, now provide row upon row of plastic.

More "progress".

This is the age of plastic decried by Sir David Attenborough in his magnificent documentary series, Blue Planet II.

None of the above listed plastics has any possible secondary use. A small portion gets recycled, most ends up in landfill. And our supermarkets are full of them.

There is one plastic product common in our supermarkets that does get regularly re-used though – the lightweight plastic shopping bag offered at the check-out.

Oddly, although an estimated 40 per cent of these bags are re-used as bin liners as opposed to the estimated 0 per cent of other plastic products that are re-used, in an orgy of corporate virtue-signalling it's the shopping bags that are getting phased out.

Coles at Hope Island was the first supermarket on the Coast to ditch them. The rest will quickly follow.

Far be it for this column to question the commitment to the environment of these corporate giants. The oceans will indeed derive some small benefit from the redaction of these bags. The fact that, as an analysis by QUT Associate Professor Gary Mortimer shows, the move will also save the major supermarkets \$170 million per annum is no doubt just a happy coincidence.

But while the benefits of removing the other types of plastics listed – the ones they are not targeting – would be indisputable, the benefits of removing the shopping bags are far less clear.

A report to the South Australian parliament in November 2012 on the results of a ban on free check-out bags in that state showed that sales of bin liners, typically far thicker than the shopping bags they replaced, soared fivefold following the ban. Ka-ching! More profit for the supermarkets.

Even more remarkably, a study by Britain's Environment Agency in 2006, which has never been seriously challenged, showed that the re-usable bags shoppers are encouraged to use in the place of banned plastic bags typically have a more serious impact on the environment.

The report estimated a paper bag would have to be re-used four times to have less impact on the environment than a plastic shopping bag, while a cotton bag – the sort popular among well-meaning hipsters – would need to be used a whopping 173 times.

These kinds of studies are not new, and are very well known among the retail community.

Yet the supermarket giants target shopping bags and leave the mountain of unnecessary plastic lurking behind the check-outs solidly in place.

They add cost and inconvenience to the consumer and then have the temerity to suggest that they are the ones who are "taking action" on behalf of the environment.

What we are witnessing is no more than corporate greed dressed up as virtue which will do little to help the wondrous sea life threatened by our plastic addiction.

If Woolworths and Coles were really serious about reducing the use of plastic they would end the ridiculous practice of selling sliced carrots or bunches of bananas in plastic bags and return to a more old-fashioned, common sense way of doing business. Profits might sink a little, but a little less plastic would sink into our oceans.

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