

ABUNDANT EVIDENCE ALREADY AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT PLASTIC BAG BANS

The call for a national ban on plastic shopping bags goes well beyond the issue of litter and into the detrimental impacts that plastics have on coastal and marine environments and on the wildlife that relies on them. Plastic bags may only constitute 1% of Australia's litter, according to the National Litter Index, but the impacts on the natural environment are far more significant and far reaching.

"Dr Trevor Thornton's comments, reported by SBS on Friday, suggesting that more evidence is needed to justify banning plastic bags, are entirely misdirected," said Jeff Angel, Director of the Boomerang Alliance today. "Apart from a failure to acknowledge the already significant body of research identifying plastic bags as one of the top 3 threats to seabirds and marine life, Dr Thornton's commentary highlights the extremely narrow perspective that continues to inform some participants in the plastics debate."

The light weight nature of plastic bags means that they are easily transported from land-based sources to waterways and into the oceans, making them readily available for the high proportion of marine and bird life that inhabit coastal regions. Once a bag reaches the ocean, the problems are manifold.

For many marine animals, plastic bags floating in the water course bear close resemblance to jelly fish and are easily confused as a food source. Ingestion can result in gut blockage, compromising the animal's digestive tract, limiting its capacity to absorb the nutrients vital for its survival. Further to this, entanglement is a significant problem, particularly with regard to heavier weight plastic bags that remain intact much longer in the natural environment.

Plastics also contain phthalate, a plasticiser recognised for causing hormonal imbalance and compromising reproductive systems in seabirds. The porosity of plastic attracts other toxins which piggyback, particularly on microplastic particles and are then carried long distances on ocean currents.

Lightweight bags are degraded in the marine environment, through exposure to sunlight and physical abrasion, but rather than breaking down, they merely break up into smaller and smaller pieces, entering the food chain at lower levels and increasing the risk of toxin transfer to human. While the risks to human health are currently unclear, an increasing body of evidence is emerging, particularly in relation to materials such as polystyrene, which contains styrene, a known carcinogen that is released when it EPS comes into contact with temperatures above 70 degrees centigrade.

The suggested problem of a corresponding increase in bin liner sales represents an unreasonable point of comparison. Purpose-built liners are specifically designed and used to contain household waste and reliably end up being handled by the waste stream, with far less potential for escape into the environment. While the use of these plastic bags remains undesirable, the volume sold is significantly smaller than the billions of lightweight shopping bags given away free by retailers annually and their potential for causing environmental damage is significantly lower.

"With due respect to Dr Thornton's academic credentials, we would strongly encourage him to consider his position in light of the extensive research already done, by our own CSIRO Oceans and Atmosphere Flagship, alongside other international organisations of note, including the United Nations Environment Program," Mr Angel said. "This is not merely a litter issue. Australians are embracing the shift away from problem plastics and the NSW government needs to join every other Australian jurisdiction by responding to the growing opposition within the electorate to the plastics in our waste streams, in our litter and in our environment – there is little doubt that Australia is ready."

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Jeff Angel – Director, Boomerang Alliance

Jeff Angel is Director of the Boomerang Alliance, a collaboration of 47 allied groups and the Total Environment Centre. Jeff has worked for policy, business and legal changes across a wide spectrum of environmental issues (city and country) for over 40 years including protection of rainforests and wilderness, air quality, urban river regeneration, Sydney's Green Games, land clearing, endangered species and climate change. He has been prominent in debates about waste and recycling and led the campaign for the introduction of a container deposit system in Australia.

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