

## Candidate 3 evidence

### Plastic Lives

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The plastic bubble was burst in Scotland of the 20th of October 2014 with the introduction of a mandatory plastic bag charge in a bid to tackle Scotland's litter problem. A staggering amount of 1 trillion plastic bags are used world-wide each year. Plastic bags blowing in the wind are a dishearteningly familiar sight – and one with environmental repercussions, taking up to hundreds of years to decompose. They often end up in water courses and are catastrophic when they reach the marine environment. Each year Scotland, alone, currently works its way through more than 800 million bags - that's more bags per head than England, Wales or Northern Ireland. The United Kingdom as a whole gives out at least nine billion plastic bags per annum. This charge is a starting point in raising awareness of the impact our presence is creating in our world.

We cannot ignore the devastating effect discarded plastic carrier bags, are having on the marine life and wildlife. Note that these bags never biodegrade, but they do breakdown and as they do toxic additives are released into the environment. According to the Los Angeles Times one of the most common items found on California's beaches are plastic bags, discarded as litter. Rain water or even a light gentle breeze will flush them through storm drains or directly to lochs, streams and rivers that lead to the ocean. There is no doubt that they will eventually find seawater endangering the aquatic life. Consequently, we are harming our own food supply. Few shoppers stop to consider that disposable plastic bags have an overwhelming impact on marine animals such as whales, seals, sea birds and turtles. More than 100,000 animals die every year after ingesting or becoming entangled in them. "As the oceans choke on plastic so do the whales." In August 2008, a sperm whale washed up dead on the beach near Point Reyes, California, with 450 pounds of fishing net, rope, and plastic bags found in its stomach. In March of this year a 10-meter-long dead sperm whale that washed up on Spain's South Coast had swallowed 59 different plastic items amounting to a total of 17 kilograms. The plastic interfered with the animal's food intake and eventually blocked the digestive system ultimately leading to its death. These are not isolated incidents. Starting in 1996 in America, more than 1 billion single-use plastic bags were given out free of charge every day. In 2009 the U.S. International Trade Commission reported that 102 billion plastic bags were used in the U.S. that year. How many whales have died as a result?

It is evident that change is occurring which is vital in maintaining our environment and also reducing our carbon footprint. We must show responsiveness to counteract any negative reactions to our choices thus preventing further destruction to our fragile eco-system. The European Parliament aims to "slash the use [of plastic bags] by 80% by 2025 or follow the lead of Italy and ban them all together". Already with the introduction of the charge in Scotland, Asda has seen a 90% reduction in the use of plastic bags and close behind Morrison's has seen an 80% drop. Before the tax, Ireland found that plastic bags made up almost 5% of visible litter whereas now it has dropped to less than an astounding 1%. Wales became the first part of the UK to introduce a minimum charge for single-use carrier bags in 2011, followed by Northern Ireland last year. As part of a study in 2012 to document the impact of the 5p charge in Wales it found that waste has reduced by 34% and also benefits charity by 30%. Another great example is Denmark, which introduced a charge in 2003, and now has the lowest plastic bag use in Europe, using four plastic bags per person per year.

New legislation imposed by the Scottish government mandates all retailers to charge a minimum of 5p per single-use carrier bag given out to customers. However, what are the reasons behind the charge? Does this affect retailers? Where does the money go and exactly which bags will the customers pay for? Individual businesses are free to choose what to do with the revenue. The government is gently encouraging retailers to donate the profits to

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good causes, "particularly ones that benefit the environment". Zero Waste Scotland have signed up 160 retailers to their "Carrier Bag Commitment", meaning they have agreed to donate the proceeds to good causes, and report on how many bags they have sold and how they've used the money. Marks and Spencer's, The Co-Operative Group and Superdry are among those who have committed. These companies have invested in reusable carrier bags to encourage the reduction of our throwaway habits and their hook is 'Bag for Life' meaning they will replace the bag free of charge if it breaks. Additionally the majority of the public is embracing this trend and thus far we have seen an environmental improvement.

Unfortunately many Scottish citizens view this as an attack on the working class families to further impoverish their already stretched budgets thus making more profit for the large band of hypermarkets. However, this point is largely incorrect, while fixed taxes and fees do represent a higher relative cost to those on lower incomes this falls most heavily on those who fail to use reusable bags. After an initial purchase of one or more bags for life the consumer need never pay again.

If plastic bags were as detrimental to the environment as claimed then they would be banned. The government have the power to enforce laws in aid of public safety and health; therefore it would appear logical for them to ban the use of plastic bags equivalent to the drink driving ban. Ultimately manufacturing industries would suffer creating a loss of jobs and lost revenues for towns and cities. In the United States, the plastics industry accounts for more than \$374 billion dollars in annual shipments and directly employs nearly 900 thousand people. While this may have a negative impact on the economy, though this has yet to be demonstrated, in previous cases the short-sighted use of resources in an environmentally destructive way may result in more long term damage to the economy and will need to end eventually; by taking pro-active action the damage may be mitigated. Especially as the European parliament is taking steps towards this, and may later seek to use punitive measures to elicit the same change in behaviour. It is also worth noting that the intention is not presently to stop the use of plastic bags but to curtail the levels of use.

Think of it as a good deed - a shopper uses a disposable bag on average for just minutes whilst the toll on the environment lasts for decades.

Overall, I think it is necessary to have this 5p carrier bag charge in place: not only does it force the public to develop an awareness to the dangers of plastic and the detrimental effects it has on the sea life and land animals, but also it allows us to become involved in charity. I agree that it is difficult to change habits although I, certainly, would prefer not to live in a rubbish filled society. Use a plastic bag and become the murderer of precious and valuable species to the ocean's evolution and maintenance or use the environmentally friendly bags and become a 'preserver'. Consequently while a step in the right direction it would seem there is considerable work still to be done. Let's take charge and ensure that the world we grew up in is there for the future generation.

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