



## Plastic bags vindicated in the marine environment

*(This commentary dated October 2009)*

Scientists and environmentalists have attacked a global campaign to ban plastic bags which they say is based on flawed science and exaggerated claims. As a result, for many years, Governments, Retailers and various pressure groups, have thrown their weight behind campaigns to ban plastic bags altogether. Now, scientists, politicians and marine experts are slamming these governments and groups for joining a “bandwagon” based on poor science.

The widely stated accusation that bags kill 100,000 animals and a million seabirds every year is false, experts have told the media. They pose only a minimal threat to most marine species, including seals, whales, dolphins and seabirds. No one is suggesting that plastic bags are not an environmental threat, but the threat can be seen more as land based rather than marine. Bags going to litter and landfill rather than being recycled, remains a hot topic. The massive numbers of used bags, both thin and thick, used around the world on a daily basis cannot be ignored and requires earnest attention.

Campaigners say that plastic bags pollute coastlines and waterways, killing or injuring birds and livestock on land and in the oceans, destroying vast numbers of seabirds, seals, turtles and whales. Most deaths were caused when creatures became caught up in waste produce. “Plastic bags don’t figure in entanglement,” said David Laist, the author of a seminal 1997 study on the subject. “**The main culprits are discarded fishing gear, ropes, lines and strapping bands.** Most mammals are too big to get caught up in a plastic bag.”

**However**, the accusation is based on a misinterpretation of a 1987 Canadian study in Newfoundland, which found that, between 1981 and 1984, more than 100,000 marine mammals, including birds, were killed by discarded nets. The Canadian study did not mention plastic bags.

Fifteen years later in 2002, when the Australian Government commissioned a report into the effects of plastic bags, its authors misquoted the Newfoundland study, mistakenly attributing the deaths to “plastic bags”.

This was latched on to by conservationists as proof that bags were the killers. For four years the “typo” remained uncorrected. It was only in 2006 that the authors altered the report, replacing “plastic bags” with “plastic debris”.

In a postscript to the correction they admitted that the original Canadian study had referred to fishing tackle, **not** plastic debris, as the threat to the marine environment.

Regardless, the erroneous claim became the keystone of a growing campaign to demonise plastic bags.

Plastic particles known as nurdles, that make their way into the sea from manufacturers, are a much greater threat than plastic bags, as they can be easily consumed by birds and marine animals. So are small plastic items such as small bottle tops which do get sometimes get ingested by larger marine creatures. Statistics from global coastal cleanups show that plastic bags are not the only major offender – caps and lids, plastic bottles and food wrappers are also major shoreline litter contributors and deserve equal attention to bags.



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Addressing litter awareness – changing the behaviour of consumers - promoting recycling and reducing carbon emissions are far more important goals than just banning plastic bags. One needs to remember that many plastic bags are there to protect the food or drink contents and without them much more food would be wasted.

Effective municipal waste management structures in concert with industry and consumers that ensure that post consumer waste is recovered for recycling, solid recovered fuel or energy generation is the much needed driving force across all nations.

For more info on cleanups and how you can make a difference, visit

[www.cleanup-SA.co.za](http://www.cleanup-SA.co.za)