The teeming plasticized masses' awakening

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Culture Change Letter #158 --
Curious to check on any news on plastic bag bans or bag fees, I did a Google search for plastic bags to complement Culture Change's new story on Berkeley's joining San Francisco's lead. I was amazed that there were roughly three dozen stories from around the world in the twenty-four hour period up to May 4. These stories were about the problems and future of plastic bags, and did not, for example, include the usual stories about crimes committed with plastic bags.

Among the most exciting developments is that a town in Devon, UK has entirely rejected plastic bags for environmental reasons, the first place in Europe to do so. This is just one of the many stories covered in the mainstream corporate press on the new news-genre of the plastic plague.

Headlines around the world include "Ethiopia: Outlawing Plastic Bags; Will That Take Shopping Backwards?" and "Boston eyes plastic bag ban".
One story from India asks, "Ever thought of defeating the plastic peril? If yes, then use alternatives to plastic bags" (Deccan Herald).
More obscure publications blare,

- "Age of plastic belongs in the past" (Nanaimo News Bulletin, Canada)

- "Household store IKEA starts charging for plastic bags" (Channel News Asia, Singapore) "First it was the 'Bring Your Own Bag Day' initiative, now retailer IKEA has stopped providing free plastic bags."

Want evidence of more mainstream coverage?

- USA Today, May 3, 2007:
"San Francisco, a reliable source of laughs and hyperventilating policy decisions, has decided to ban evil plastic bags." (Environmentalism vs. skepticism article)

- Forbes magazine is on it, in Steve F.'s "Our Secret Weapon" column on May 4. After all, how can he ignore "Bengal bans plastic carry bags below 40 microns", for example? (Zee News, Kolkata, India, May 4, 2007)

The world has had environmental awakenings since the first Earth Day in 1970, but almost four decades later it has been too long an awakening. The wasted and lost time has thrown our survival and the Earth’s benign climate into doubt. However, reaffirming Culture Change's optimistic facet:

Now there may be a new quality of awakening that can mushroom into a more meaningful, stronger movement. The difference may simply be that the lid is coming off the plastic container of lies about plastic itself. The tide of plastic trash is about to ebb. This has implications larger by far than beautifying the landscape or saving some sea animals.

As we begin to realize what plastics do to the environment and to our bodies, it will be an excellent test of resolve to take effective, broad action on many levels. To cut back on -- or lose -- the convenience of petroleum, e.g., plastics, is to face the difficult limits we are running up against when it comes to petroleum’s role in daily living and its destructive power. Efforts to both grow crops and raise animals to produce substitutes for energy and materials will soon prove far too unrealistic for perpetuating the consumer economy.

But we may be changing course as a society and a culture. We will not change enough via voluntary, rational means, but at least the direction is now clear. By the time petrocollapse may hit, the average person may be aware, just as s/he is aware of the effect of greenhouse gas emissions, that we have gluttonized too long on wasteful products made from petroleum. The human population just about doubled since 1970, made possible largely by petroleum. Meanwhile, our added numbers magnified the harm done by petroleum use.

Better late than never, millions of consumers in San Francisco and other cities are about to learn this year that plastic bags made of petroleum are not a good thing and that they have been replaced. The several answers to "Why aren’t they a good thing?" will soon become apparent to all but the obstinate or the brain-dead.

Culture Change made the connection to peak oil for the San Francisco Dept. of Environment when the city agency was formulating the ill-fated plastic-bag fee in 2004. The proposed ordinance for a 17-cent fee per bag stemmed from the

cost of cleaning up the city's collected compost and the streets from trash consisting of plastic bags. The destructive effect on sea life was already known, as were the factors of war-for-oil and harm to the climate, from 180 million plastic bags disposed of in the city each year.

By switching to the compostable bags, the city will be conserving 430,000 gallons of oil used to make traditional bags, the equivalent of keeping 140,000 cars off the street for a day, according to Jared Blumenfeld, head of San Francisco's Environment Dept.

There are over 100 billion plastic checkout bags distributed through U.S. retailers each year, and the production of these bags burns up more than 12 million barrels of oil. If that weren't bad enough, plastic bags take up to 1,000 years to degrade in a landfill.

As reported in recent weeks in Culture Change, San Francisco overcame its mayor's rejection of the bag fee and the even more treacherous state ban on bag fees last year. The mechanism of relying on bioplastics this spring was not ideal, but now we do have petroleum plastics finally on the run: compostable bags or paper bags as well as canvas reusable bags will the only bags offered at all major supermarkets and large pharmacies in a matter of months.

Topping the anti-plastic fervor:

"'Plastic is a bigger danger than global warming, or at least it is in the immediate sense, considering it is snuffing out the lowest common denominator in the food chain,' says Neil Seldman, a waste recycling expert and president of the Institute for Local Self Reliance, an organization with a long track record of promoting sustainable communities." (Greenbiz.com)

Berkeley

At the Berkeley City Council meeting of April 24, 2007, the ball got rolling for a ban on petroleum plastic bags. It was approved on the Consent Calendar to have the city's Zero Waste Dept. investigate adopting a San Francisco-style change-over to compostable bioplastic, paper and reusable bags. Speaking in favor of the measure, I gave testimony before the council:

My preliminaries -- my name and affiliation (Culture Change), that in San Francisco I had worked toward that city's ban on petroleum plastic bags -- were extended in an attempt to link plastics to the big picture: I added that I was working on a petrocollapse conference, and that plastics are related to that project as well as to global warming.

To satisfy the greenest council members, I explained that relying on bioplastics was not the point of the San Francisco legislation, as that city's government realizes that reusing canvass bags is the actual goal. I added that a report on culturechange.org, "Peak Soil," questioned as sustainable biofuels and therefore bioplastics.

"Banning plastic bags made of petroleum is the first step we have to make. Not only are the Pacific Ocean's two garbage patches -- each larger than Texas -- filled with six times as much plastic debris as krill -- the zooplankton at the base of the food chain -- we all have plastics in our bodies due to migration or leaching of the toxic chemicals in plastic. These cause cancer, diabetes, obesity and birth defects.

"So we must look at all plastics after we deal with just the bags: bisphenol-A, phthatlates, and PVC... "BING!" [timer goes off and it's time to leave the podium]. Thank you for this good work."

The "Compostable Bag Ordinance" agenda-item that passed read:

"Recommendation: That the City Council refer San Francisco's new ordinance requiring compostable, recyclable paper or reusable bags to the Zero Waste Commission for analysis and recommendations for a possible City of Berkeley ordinance.
Financial Implications: None"

Mayor Bates said, "banning the bags could benefit the city's greenhouse gas reduction plan because using compostable bags would reduce the amount of energy it takes to recycle the bags." (Berkeley Voice) "In November, 81% of Berkeley's voters approved a measure calling for the city to drastically slash greenhouse gases. The city hopes to trim greenhouse gases by at least 25% by 2020 and by 80% by 2050." (Berkeley Voice)

From the Berkeley Daily Planet (not daily, but a few times a week):

"...[P]assing unanimously was a referral to the Zero Waste Commission and the Community Environment Advisory Commission to look at adopting an ordinance similar to the one passed in San Francisco that would ban large grocery stores and chain drug stores from using non-compostable plastic shopping bags.

"Speaking during the public comment period, Jan Lundberg said the goal was to replace the plastic, not to use less harmful kinds of plastics."

Los Angeles followed San Francisco's lead several day's after history was made by the Bay. L.A.'s Daily News reported with its headline editorial:

"Bag the bags - L.A. must cut down on plastic pollution":

(4/11/2007)
"Those ubiquitous plastic shopping bags that most every retailer in the land uses as a courtesy to their customers may have seen their time come - and go.

"The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday agreed to study a ban on petroleum-based plastic shopping bags, and in so doing join a growing trend. San Francisco County supervisors enacted a bag ban last month. New York state is considering the first statewide ban on the bags.

"Knowing what we do about global warming and the human hand in polluting the planet, this is a debate that Los Angeles must have. But the reality of such a ban is going to take some working out. About six billion such bags are sold in Los Angeles County. Banning them could have tremendous cost to consumers and business. Replacing the bags with biodegradable forms might not be an answer either, as some research indicates that if they are not composted properly they could clog landfills and hurt marine life.

"Still, it's something that can and should be worked out. There is a growing understanding that we must start stepping lighter on this Earth. And by choosing - perhaps with just a tinge of coercion - to stop filling up our landfills with disposable, nonreusable bags is a great way to ring in Earth Day 2007"

Albertsons supermarkets are getting the jump on the changeover, discouraging plastic bags.

Santa Cruz is entertaining a petroleum-plastic bag ban too.

The State isn't doing much, but:
"A statewide law that goes into effect this summer requires all grocery stores to give customers a place to recycle plastic bags.

Eugene, Oregon can pass a bag-fee ordinance, unlike California which is limited to bag bans. I spoke with the mayor, Kitty Piercy, last month about a ban or a fee, and she was receptive. I gave her a copy of Our Synthetic Sea, the award-winning documentary DVD, plus a fact-sheet from the Campaign Against the Plastic Plague.

Outside the United Plastic States of America:

The first plastic bag-free town in Europe is Modbury. Biobag, a firm in the UK, has supplied Modbury shops with up to 60,000 Mater-Bi bags which are being sold alongside paper, reusable cotton and jute bags.
[Jutes were old invaders who nevertheless lived a heck of a lot more sustainably than the descendents of the British tribal melange. Long live the Jute (bag)! - ed]

Spurred by environmental fervor and growing concern about the 100 billion or more plastic bags thought to be littering the world and clogging the seas, the idea of a plastic bag-free town came from Rebecca Hoskins, a young Modbury-born-and-raised wildlife camerawoman. She went to the Pacific last year to film marine life for the BBC but experienced horrendous plastic bag pollution. She said: “We are not saying plastic is bad at all - if it is used wisely.”

Elsewhere in our plastic world, in Pakistan, the city of Nazim vowed to free itself from polytene bags. According to Associate Press of Pakistan, "Meanwhile, the magistrates of the city government during the last five days sent more than 70 people behind bars who were selling plastic bags."

Stay tuned to Culture Change with its finger on the pulse of San Francisco -- that's a hint on futher action against plastics!

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"Plastic Waste: More Dangerous than Global Warming":

greenbiz.com

Deccan Herald, India "Village tales" (May 4, 2007):

deccanherald.com

"You Can Make a Difference: Plastic bags", Novato Advance:

novatoadvance.com

berkeleydailyplanet.com

Pakistan: ban on polytene bags in public interest: City Nazim Monday, 30 April 2007:

app.com.pk

European Plastics News and Plastics & Rubber Weekly magazines (PRW.com:

prw.com

Devon town bans plastic bags:

theage.com.au

Plastic bag data for U.S.:

reusablebags.com

The Berkeley Voice

ci.berkeley.ca.us

Our Synthetic Sea,the award-winning documentary DVD,is available through:

algalita.org

Campaign Against the Plastic Plague:

earthresource.org