



# HBCA

HUMAN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE FOR ANIMALS



## CASE STUDY

# BREAKING THE BAG HABIT

**ORGANISATION** MARINE CONSERVATION SOCIETY

**COUNTRY** UK

**DATE SUBMITTED** 2 MAY 2017

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**KEYWORDS** MARINE LITTER; PLASTIC;  
RETAILERS; PUBLIC; LEGISLATION;  
CONSERVATION

### Project Background

Plastic bag use has become part of normal behaviour for people and could be described as a habit since their use is not always necessary, but because many people use them without much thought. In the UK plastic bags have always been in the top 20 of marine litter items found in beach litter surveys, causing a large pollution problem to marine habitats, and cause harm and suffering to wildlife.

The issue of plastic bag use and the subsequent pollution and harm they cause to marine wildlife had been a growing issue of concern for at least ten years before the legislation on plastic bag charges was finally brought in. In 2013 8.34 billion single use bags were given out on the UK. The issue developed slightly differently in each devolved nation of the UK with Wales being the first country to bring in legislation, Scotland and Northern Ireland following and England being the final nation to take action.

*At MCS we have been battling the problem of plastic pollution for many years. The problem of plastic bags was really brought home to us by the work that Rebecca Hosking did to get her town of Modbury in Devon to be the first town to go plastic bag free and by the images of a minke whale that died off the coast of Normandy with its stomach full of plastic bags.*



Throughout this time MCS had been raising awareness and developing many years of data from their beach clean activities to demonstrate the scale of the problem.

A strong opposing lobby from the plastics industry, coupled with existing resistance from Defra meant that it took longer for the legislation to be passed in England compared to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

### **Overview of Intervention**

A coalition called 'Break the Bag Habit' was formed between ourselves - the Marine Conservation Society (MCS), Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) Keep Britain Tidy (KBT), Surfers against Sewage (SAS), Thames 21 and Greener upon Thames. All of us except Greener upon Thames were all working separately on various marine litter issues in the UK already. Greener upon Thames was a campaign group set up specifically to tackle the problem of plastic bags. This was the first time all these NGOs had worked together and we picked carrier bags in England as we had all been working on it to some extent and could bring a mix of expertise and standpoints to the group – e.g. marine, rural and urban. Following the success of charges in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland we also felt this was a campaign that had a good chance of success.

We ran polls to make sure we knew the existing public behaviours and views were and we made sure that we were presenting solutions to the

government that we could already demonstrate would get public support. We even went to the Conservative Party Conference dressed as plastic bag monsters!

We involved the public proactively in our campaigning efforts to make them feel part of the solution, this ranged from running petitions to asking them to write to MPs and volunteering in our beach cleans, the data from which then also fed into our political campaigns.

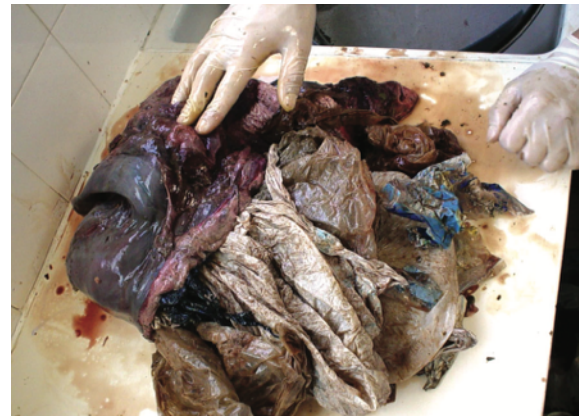
### **Welfare Concerns**

Like other forms of marine litter, plastic bags when disposed of improperly, can end up on our coastlines and in the ocean and cause entanglement and ingestion problems for a variety of marine species including birds, turtles, cetaceans and seals. Plastic bags are frequently found in the stomachs of dead whales and dolphins that have stranded and are known to be swallowed by turtles who mistake them for edible jellyfish. Once ingested, plastic bags cannot be digested by the animal and the animals can die from starvation (due to the space the bag takes up in the stomach) or from ulcerations or other injuries caused by the bag(s). Birds are known to get plastic bags wrapped around their heads, bodies or limbs and the loops of the handles may also entangle larger animals such as seals and sea lions. Suffering caused by plastic bags and other forms of marine litter is often prolonged and it can take days, weeks or even months for an animal to die.

We developed clear arguments to use with different audiences; for the government we had to persuade them that there were cost benefits (i.e. less money spent on clean-ups) and that it would not be a problem for low income families. For the public we had to convince them that it would be easy, that it wouldn't be much money (only 5p) if they needed a bag and that there were practical solutions like having non-disposable bags that could be kept in the car or in your handbag for whenever you do the shopping.

Our campaign was a good balance of science and emotion based campaigning - we made sure everything we claimed was backed up by science but we showed people images of the devastating impact plastic has on marine wildlife and the environment.

We made good use of the media to get our message out to a mainstream audience - it had to be mainstream as it is not only Guardian readers who go to the supermarket and use shopping bags! The Daily Mail picked up the campaign and ran it as their own campaign and this really widened our reach.



## Achievements

- The main achievement has been the success of the campaign to get the plastic bag charge bought in as legislation across the whole of the UK
- The legislation resulted in an immediate change in people's behaviour. Even though there is nothing preventing them from paying for a bag if they want one, the evidence we have from supermarkets shows that there is now a fall of 80-90% in the number of plastic bags people use.
- We succeeded in getting the support of the public because we were able to show that a charge is a solution that is practical, does not impinge on their rights to have a bag if they want one and we were able to demonstrate the benefits to animals and the environment. People responded well to this - consequently opposition to the legislation did not come from the public but mainly from the plastic industry and parts of the UK government.
- Once it became apparent that a change was coming retailers caught on to the business opportunity of producing non-disposable bags in attractive fabrics and colours and these are now widely available.
- The beach clean results from 2016 showed the number of plastic bags found as litter on UK beaches dropped by around 40% between 2015 and 2016. In 2015 there were, on average, 11 plastic bags per 100 metres of coastline cleaned but in 2016 there were just under seven. This is the lowest number reported in over a decade. We will have to keep monitoring in the years to come to see if this trend continues but these initial results are promising and will have a direct positive impact on animal welfare.

## Challenges

- Plastic bag use was standard behaviour for the majority of people in the UK, it was a habit that we had to change without making people feel like their rights were being impinged upon - our awareness raising on this issue was built up over a number of years and this gave people time to get used to the possibility that change might be coming and this certainly helped as an overnight change would probably not have been acceptable to the majority of people. We also ran polls to make sure that our approach would be likely to get support.
- The campaign faced a very strong opposition lobby from the plastics industry - to combat this we had to make sure our campaign messages were very clear and that our stats stood up to scrutiny.
- Some of the opposing arguments were challenging, for example that lower income people would be negatively affected and that it would result in food contamination. However, we were able to address this by showing that these issues were not a problem in other countries who had implemented similar legislation.
- There was a clear reluctance from Defra and DCLG (Department of Communities and Local Government) right from the start. However, the successful charges that had been brought in in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland helped to combat many of their arguments.
- In England there is still an exception for small businesses, (despite small businesses not opposing the charge), paper bags and more worryingly for 'biodegradable' plastic bag and we are still campaigning to get these changed.

## Sustainability

There is some evidence (e.g. from Ireland) that people do become habituated to the bag charges and after a while become more willing to pay for a bag thus undermining the efforts to curb bag use by having a charge. For this reason a review period has been built into the legislation whereby an increased charge could be bought in after a period of time. This has been the case in Ireland where it was found that an increase in cost reduced people's bag use once again.

Work must continue to educate people that they should remember to carry their own reusable bags rather than buying one, regardless of whether they consider the cost cheap or expensive.

## Lessons to Pass On

- We were able to involve the public directly in our activities due to our beach cleans and petitions. The data collected from beach cleans fed directly into our campaigns and people could feel like they were part of something.
- It was a huge benefit to have a number of organisations working together towards the same goal, putting forward the same messages to different audiences, ensuring that the overall awareness raising and lobbying effort was much greater.
- All of our messaging was very clear and was tailored to be suitable for different audiences.

- It was critical that all of our facts were correct and could be backed up by credible data - when working on a high profile issue like this and one which involves powerful industries with opposing views, your arguments and facts will be challenged so you must be ready for this.
- Sometimes the public need time to get used to an idea and this issue had been slowly creeping up the political and public agenda for many years before the support from both public and government became evident. This was helped by an overall increasing awareness of marine litter issues and the growth in participation levels of the public in our beach clean events which both served to keep this issue in the public eye.
- Patience and commitment for the long-haul is required for something like this as these kind of nationwide changes rarely happen overnight - this was a process that took a decade in total with perhaps 5 years of that in active campaign mode. We think the tipping point was a combination of action being taken in other countries (from the governments perspective) and a growing awareness of the issue that created acceptance that something needed to be done (amongst the public).
- We used the devolved nations in the UK to our advantage in this campaign. It is always beneficial if you can show case studies of how something is working well in another country, in this case different countries within the UK. The fact that Wales, Scotland and N. Ireland already had bag charges in place made it easier to make it happen in England.



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Valuable information is not easily accessible to those planning and involved with projects aiming to apply HBC theories and principles. Hence, HBCA is developing a resource that provides an overview of interventions and the lessons we can learn from them. If you have a case study to submit or any enquiries about this case study, please get in touch.