



Speech by

Lindy Nelson-Carr

MEMBER FOR MUNDINGBURRA

Hansard Tuesday, 23 November 2004

PLASTIC BAGS

Ms NELSON-CARR (Mundingburra—ALP) (11.45 a.m.): I was observing the movements of a jellyfish in one of the smaller display tanks at a recent visit to Townsville's world-class Reef HQ Aquarium. It is remarkable how much jellyfish resemble plastic bags, so it is not difficult to see why sea creatures and even birds make the fatal mistake of swallowing plastic bags because they look like something that they would normally eat.

Recent figures from the Department of the Environment and Heritage show us that Australians use about 6.9 billion plastic bags every year and that up to 80 million of them end up in our streets, in our parks and in our waterways. The World Wide Fund for Nature estimates that more than 100,000 whales, seals, turtles and birds die every year because of these plastic bags. Planet Ark, the not-for-profit environmental organisation, cites plastic bags and cigarette butts as being amongst the most common litter items in Australia, killing thousands of animals, clogging drains and spoiling the beauty of the Australian landscape.

Despite the statistics, there is a bright spot on the horizon. I welcome the mounting acceptance of inexpensive, reusable cotton and calico shopping bags. I find it very encouraging that more and more of these environmentally friendly bags are appearing in supermarkets as shoppers reduce their reliance on plastic bags for carrying groceries and other items. One example of this snowballing trend towards reusable shopping bags is evidenced in Townsville's Flinders Mall every Sunday morning during the very popular Cotters Markets, where I was last Sunday. It is now very common to see reusable shopping bags being used to carry fruit and vegetables that are purchased from the stall holders. With Townsville City Council advocating environmentally friendly bags with other local government authorities, including the Burdekin Shire Council—it is doing the same thing—the movement is at last catching on.

In April last year Coles Bay in Tasmania became the first place in Australia to ban plastic checkout bags. Ireland has a tax on plastic shopping bags. There was a big reduction in their use after the 15 euro cent levy per supermarket checkout bag was introduced in Ireland in 2002. There have been suggestions that major Australian retail chains Coles and Woolworths should bring in a levy to help limit the use of plastic bags in our country even further. Such a move would have a definite impact because supermarkets are by far the nation's biggest plastic bag source.

Under notice to halve their plastic bag use, supermarket operators now sell those alternative shopping bags as a matter of course. Even when plastic bags are used at the checkout counters they often carry the words 'please recycle'. I think it would be even better to put on there 'please recycle or reuse'.

In Townsville and Thuringowa, which have excellent kerbside recycling services, plastic bags are taboo in recycling bins. However, many Coles, Woolworths and Safeway stores in the area now accept plastic checkout bags for recycling. With Christmas only a month away, let us give the environment a really big present by cutting back on our use of plastic bags. Could I make a suggestion about taking the revolution against plastic bags to another dimension by enticing members here today and others to reduce their use of Australian bank notes which of course, as we know, are made out of plastic. Plastic bags they are not, but I would be more than happy, as the member for Mundingburra, to keep a recycling bin for plastic bank notes in my office and I invite members of this House to feel free to deposit their bank notes there any time.