



# PAPER BAGS, THE NATURAL CHOICE

**There is increasing concern about the over-use of plastic bags and particularly their contribution to marine litter. Australia and New Zealand have taken action by introducing bans, charges and other initiatives to limit their use. Whilst a general reduction in unnecessary packaging will be a valuable contribution to a circular and less wasteful economy, paper bags, because of their natural and renewable attributes, present an attractive and practical alternative. Studies show that they can be the natural and environmental alternative to plastic and textile bags.**

## **Society is concerned about the over-consumption of plastic.**

In recent years there has been growing recognition of the impact that single-use packaging, particularly plastic, has on the environment. There are concerns that relatively little plastic packaging is recycled with a 16% AU average in 2021. When discarded irresponsibly, plastics are a significant contributor to marine pollution. It has been widely reported that by the year 2050 there could be more plastic in the ocean than fish.<sup>2</sup>

Between 2016-2017, almost 20 per cent of rubbish found in Australia beaches was attributed to plastic bags and packaging, while paper and cardboard packaging made up less than 5 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Between 2013 and 2019, 3% of beach litter in Europe was found to be plastic shopping bags and 0.2% were bags made of paper, although the prevalence of plastic bags has reduced since EU Governments acted to limit their use.<sup>4</sup>

**“ The main source of ocean plastic pollution is land-based- 80% of plastic in the ocean originates on land. ”**

WWF, How Does Plastic End Up in The Ocean.

## **EU countries must drastically reduce consumption of lightweight plastic carrier bags.**

Australians use over 5 billion plastic bags per year, according to Clean Up Australia.<sup>5</sup> Australian states and territories have adopted various measures to try to reduce consumption,

such as commitment to the ban of lightweight plastic bags, and mandatory charges. These measures have encouraged consumers to reuse their shopping bags and some retailers to seek alternatives to traditional, non- biodegradable plastic. Plastic on Australian beaches has reduced by a third in the past nine years, according to CSIRO, which can in part be attributed to the introduction of these measures.<sup>6</sup>

## **Paper bags can be the attractive alternative.**

The raw material for paper bags, wood, is a renewable and sustainable resource. In Australia and New Zealand, paper comes from managed regrowth forests or planted forests where the cycle of planting, growing and harvesting is carefully controlled. Australia alone has two million hectares of plantation forests and growing.<sup>7</sup>

Paper recycling rates in Australia are amongst the highest in the world, with over 87% of all paper and cardboard being recovered<sup>1</sup> (58% globally<sup>2</sup>). Even if a paper bag is irresponsibly discarded, due to its natural compostable characteristics it will have a relatively low impact. Contrary to popular belief, paper bags can be very robust. Kraft paper is especially developed for demanding packaging. Due to its long and strong virgin fibres, it has a high level of mechanical strength. The choice of glue and a proficient construction of the handles add even more to the bag's strength and durability.<sup>8</sup>

Paper bags are manufactured from a wide variety of fibre types dependent on what they are being designed to carry. Paper bags made of recycled or, a hybrid of new and recycled fibre are a cost-efficient option for non-food packaging

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[www.thepaperbag.org](http://www.thepaperbag.org).

The natural attributes of paper also resonate with consumers. According to research by Two Sides<sup>9</sup> 69% of Australian respondents prefer paper and cardboard packaging because it is better for the environment, 72% like it because it is compostable, and 50% prefer it for being easier to recycle.

### How paper bags compare environmentally.

Making reliable comparisons of the environmental impacts of different types of shopping bags can be complicated. Various organisations have undertaken Life Cycle Assessments (LCAs), which provide useful insights, but it needs to be remembered that the results are influenced by the scope of what is included, data quality, any assumptions made and the methodology.

UK Supermarket Morrisons have brought paper bags back, saving 1,300 tonnes of plastic a year and their research has revealed that their virgin-fibre paper bags and the plastic bags they're replacing have an equivalent carbon footprint. Also, at their end of life, their paper bags will have a much higher chance of being recycled; being placed in curb side paper recycling.

“ Our customers are re-using our paper bags. We tested them in the rain for up to 4 hours, with frozen food, and they still could hold the amount. ”

Natasha Cook, Morrisons Packaging Manager<sup>10</sup>.

### Sources

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When asked if customers will really re-use paper bags at least 3 times to reduce environmental impact, Natasha Cook, Morrisons' Packaging Manager, said their customer data showed that about 71% of their customers don't buy new bags.

National Australian supermarket Woolworths will be increasing the manufacturing of its paper bags, made from 70 per cent recycled paper and removing its reusable plastic bags across all stores. Woolworths has claimed that the decision will remove 9000 tonnes of plastic from annual circulation.<sup>11</sup>

While textile bags, such as those made from cotton, are undoubtedly robust, research suggests that they need to be reused at least 50 times to achieve the same climate change performance as paper.<sup>12</sup>

Comparisons to other heavier materials, such as those used in fashion retail or supermarket 'bags for life', suggest that paper bags can be comparable or even better than plastic alternatives in terms of carbon footprint.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, less overall consumption is highly necessary for society to meet the global climate challenges and the reuse of all types of bags, whatever their construction, is to be strongly encouraged.

“ For all carrier bags, reuse as many times as possible before disposal is strongly encouraged. ”

The Danish Environmental Protection Agency, 2018.

It can be concluded that paper bags, easily reused and recycled, and made with wood from sustainably managed forests, are the natural choice for consumers and retailers.

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