

Communities taking action

How two communities on different sides of the world have succeeded in eliminating throwaway plastic shopping bags

Faced with an environmental challenge, most people look to governments or other officialdom for solutions. Not so Rebecca Hosking.

Her story started while she was filming in the seas around Hawaii for a BBC natural history programme. There she found a turtle that was slowly suffocating to death with a plastic bag in its mouth. "There was nothing we could do," she said.

But there was something she could do. On returning to her home town of Modbury in south Devon, she began looking into the environmental damage caused by plastic bags and was appalled by what she found. In the marine environment alone, plastic bags are estimated to kill at least 100,000 birds, whales, seals and turtles every year. In the UK, at least 200 million plastic bags end up as litter in the streets, countryside and coast every year.

Rebecca Hosking decided that Modbury - just a few miles from the Devon coast - should become

Britain's first plastic bag-free community. In May this year she achieved that ambition.

With a population of around 1500, the town has a small supermarket and 40 or so small shops. Ms Hosking began by approaching the shopkeepers she

"Many people have asked if I applied for help with my cause through grants, or the local council or chambers of commerce. If I had, I am certain we would still be spinning wheels and caught up in red tape."

knew personally to explain her ambition and the reasons behind it. Eventually, after a lot of work convincing shopkeepers of the damage that plastic bags caused to wildlife and the environment and researching alternative bags that would meet their requirements and be sustainable, Ms Hosking won the support of every trader.

One breakthrough was an offer by the local Co-op to provide everyone in the town with a free

Fairtrade reusable cotton carrier bag. The traders also offer shoppers the choice of either a biodegradable cornstarch carrier bag that can be composted or several styles of recyclable paper

carrier bags; a charge is made for these in order to encourage people to use reusable bags.

In a letter sent to every resident, the traders of Modbury explained what they were doing and why and ended by saying that "We feel passionate about making a real contribution towards preserving the local environment and can assure you all that this initiative is just the start of a number of campaigns to work towards improving and caring for our natural surroundings".

Rebecca Hosking credits Planet Ark - which has helped a number of Australian towns go plastic bag-free - with vital help in her own campaign. The Planet Ark action was, in turn, inspired by the example of the Tasmanian town of Coles Bay, which banned plastic shopping bags in 2003, eliminating some 350,000 plastic bags from the environment every year. As with Modbury, the Coles Bay initiative was the result of one man's inspiration. Ben Kearney launched the idea because of his concerns for the whales that pass the town on their annual migration and as a response to the litter that was defacing the nearby Freycinet National Park.

For his efforts, Ben Kearney won Australia's Local Hero Award in 2005. More importantly, other communities are now emulating the example of Coles Bay, one of the latest being San Francisco.

For more information, see www.plasticbagfree.com



Modbury is proud of its switch to reusable shopping bags