

16 November 2007

I COMMEND the Ministry of Housing and Local Government and the Malaysian Plastics Forum for organising a much-needed public forum on the 3Rs (Reducing, Reusing and Recycling) on Nov 10 ("Hypermarts to cut down on plastic bags" - NST, Nov 11).

I must, however, express disappointment that the parties concerned chose to implement only soft approaches that are limited in their actual impact, such as "advising" shoppers and providing reusable plastic bag collection facilities on the premises of participating retail giants in the Klang Valley.

I am not optimistic that these facilities will be fully or properly used. The public is notorious for filling recycling bins with non-separated, soiled and unrecyclable waste. Can the organisers of the forum persuade us that by the end of the trial period, the plastic bag collection bins will not be full of soiled and torn bags and other rubbish?

In addition, without incentives or penalties, there is little reason for the public to participate in such a scheme.

I fear the public forum is just another form of "greenwashing" to boost public confidence in the institutions involved, when nothing of genuine and lasting impact has been decided.

The plastics industry is understandably wary of any policies that will restrict plastic bag usage, but as with all successful innovators, they must be willing to consider other options, for instance, manufacturing biodegradable plastic.

We must remember that it takes 11 barrels of crude oil to manufacture 1 tonne of plastic bags. Plastics will not remain cheap for long, and consumers must be weaned off their dependence through a combination of public education as well as through incentives and penalties. These may include:

- Setting up express checkout counters for shoppers who bring their own bags.
- Giving incentives in the form of bonus, shopper points or even cash rebates for shoppers who decline plastic bags.
- Charging shoppers for plastic bags and making it a nationwide policy that encompasses all retailers, including wet markets and small businesses.

NST : Plastic-bag addiction: Reward those who co-operate

Written by Administrator

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- Shifting to biodegradable plastic bags, the cost of which will be borne by shoppers so that those who bring their own bags will still enjoy incentives.

- Including wet markets, petty traders and stalls in any policy that aims to restrict plastic bag usage and waste.

Small businesses must charge for plastic bags, switch to waxed or brown paper or biodegradable bags, or face a fine if the area surrounding their business premise has an unacceptable amount of plastic litter.

Any such policy must be preceded by a media blitz to educate the public, allow for an adjustment period and quash allegations that such policies serve only to inconvenience the rakyat and enrich retailers and manufacturers.

The token acts of installing collection bins and advising shoppers and hypermarkets, while well intentioned, are timid and apologetic measures to help an ailing planet.

Judging by the amount of plastic waste choking our country, Malaysia needs to take steps to halt and reverse the damage to its environment.