

Section 3 You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 28 – 40**, which are based on Reading Passage 3 below.

Battle of the Bag

The world has declared war on the plastic bag. What did this harmless item do to attract such a negative reaction? Caroline Williams explains.

For a growing number of environmentalists, the humble plastic bag has become public enemy number one – an unnecessary evil that must be stopped. The only people who have a good word to say that must be stopped. The only people who have a good word to say about plastic bags are the plastic-bag industry, unsurprisingly. They claim that plastic bags are nowhere near the world's worst environmental problem and say the reason they are under attack is because they are an easy and emotive target that reflects individuals' guilt about general environmental responsibility. So who is right?

Since it was introduced in the 1970s, the plastic bag – made from high-density polyethylene – has become part of our lives, and today most people around the world don't use anything else to carry their shopping. Estimates around the world don't use anything else to carry their shopping. Estimates differ, but it is thought that the UK gets through at least 9 billion plastic bags a year. Globally, we carry home between 500 billion and a trillion every year. That is 150 bags a year for every person on Earth, or, to put it another way, a million a minute and rising. In the UK, even though up to 7 billion plastic bags may be reused, they still end up in rubbish bins, while a few become street litter. But ultimately the vast majority end up in landfill sites as waste. Only a fraction are incinerated for energy production and an even smaller number are recycled into heavy-duty plastic.

Startling as these statistics may be, they do not explain why plastic bags have become so hated, as they still constitute only 1% of UK litter. Claire Wilton of the environmental group Friends of the Earth claims that plastic bags are 'a waste of resources in that we use them once and throw them away'. But there are bigger and better examples of fossil fuel waste, so the issue is also about visible pollution.

Samantha Fanshawe of the UK Marine Conservation Society points out that, 'Plastic bags exceed what you would anticipate to be their pollution impact because they are so much more mobile than other types of litter.' Once the wind reaches them, they become a highly visible problem, blowing around streets and getting caught in the branches of trees.

But plastic bags can also have a devastating effect on wildlife, and the problem is increasing. One victim was a Minke whale washed up in northern France in 2002, with 800 kilometres of plastic bags and other packaging blocking its stomach. The planet Ark Environmental Foundation in Australia estimates that tens of thousands of marine animals and birds are killed every year, and since most marine animals die far out at sea, the real death toll may be much higher.

Denmark was among the first to try reducing these problems in 1994 when they introduced a tax on packaging, including carrier bags. This led to a 66% drop in take-up at the checkout, despite the fact that it was the retailers and not their customers who had to pay up. Taiwan followed in 2001, charging consumers about two pence for a plastic bag. The tax was criticized by industry and the public as being confusing and unfair but still managed to slash plastic bag usage by 69%.

In 2002, Bangladesh took a more drastic approach, bringing in a total ban on the production and sale of polyethylene and introducing a £5 on-the-spot fine for using a plastic bag. If a blanket ban seems a little extreme, it was prompted by more than just green thinking. In a country with limited waste disposal and virtually no bins, most of the 10 million or so plastic bags used every day were dropped in the street, then washed into rivers and sewers where they choked the country's drainage system. Blocked drains are widely held responsible for the devastating monsoon floods of 1988 and 1989. In the two years since the ban, the once floundering jute-bag industry has been resurrected and street children are reportedly doing a roaring trade in handmade paper bags. A resurgence of rebel plastic-bag manufacturers this year has prompted a government crackdown, with manufacturers facing up to ten years in jail and a fine of £9000.

Elsewhere, governments rich and poor are making attempts to bin the nag. The government of the north Indian state of Himachal Pradesh is also taking a hard line. There, being caught in possession of a polyethylene bag could get you seven years behind bars and £1000 fine. In 2002, Ireland introduced a tax of 15 cents on plastic carriers, payable by the consumer. Within months the number of bags taken from shops fell by 90%, and in the two years since then, the 'Plas Tax' has raised €23 million for waste management initiatives.

According to Wilton, 'plastic bags are symbolic of a society in which we use things without thinking and then throw them away. Governments have realized that, by focusing on something so symbolic, they can get messages across to people about their behaviour and how it affects the environment.' The plastic bag industry, unsurprisingly, takes issue with being blamed for general environmental irresponsibility. But even with the facts on their side, manufacturers seem resigned. 'Green marketing wins out every time,' says spokesman Peter Woodall.