



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

I remember a time before our throwaway society 'needed' nearly 13 billion plastic shopping bags every year. My mum had two bags (a wicker basket and a canvas 'shopper') that she used for most of my childhood. Admittedly, there wasn't as much shopping in those days and, of course, bread and milk were delivered to your door. But we coped perfectly well, thank you very much. Plastic bags may not be the biggest threat to the planet. But unlike most other environmental issues, this one could be solved overnight. All we have to do is to ban plastic bags altogether and turn to fashionable, reusable, long-lasting eco-bags instead. Job done. So why are high street retailers falling over themselves to come up with schemes to avoid just that? They *are* being forced to do something. Our notoriously unenvironmentally-friendly Prime Minister, spotting potential for yet another stealth tax, has warned retailers that he will force them to cut down on plastic bag use if they don't act voluntarily. But why do they have to put so much effort into doing so little?

Their so-called 'ambitious' initiatives to limit use of plastic bags get loads of publicity and are probably good for business. But rewarding their customers with brownie points for using a plastic bag more than once, or charging a few measly pence for a brand new one, isn't exactly tackling the problem head-on. Don't get me wrong. I'm delighted to see green issues forcing themselves into the mainstream like this. But I'm tired of big companies and government officials patting themselves on the back for such half-hearted nods in the direction of the environment. And please don't tell me it's impossible to ban all plastic shopping bags in one or two sweeping blows. Modbury, in Devon, became the first UK town to turn its back on them last summer, and there's no reason why the rest of us can't do the same. Then, once we've sorted out this simple environmental issue in Britain, we'll be able to work on China, where 3 billion plastic shopping bags are used every day.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, author and tv presenter.



Shopping trolleys: a friend of OAPs and the environment.

Don't tell me it's impossible to ban all plastic shopping bags – Modbury did it last summer.