



MY CALL  
By Catherine Ford

## Maui's plastic bag ban working to clean up beaches

February 20, 2011

MAUI, Hawaii, Feb. 20, 2011/ Troy Media – An unscientific survey of a single tourist walking the broad beaches between Ma'alea Harbor and Kihei on a daily basis reveals the success of a bold island experiment.

One month ago Maui County – comprising the islands of Maui, Molokai, Lanai and Kahoolawe -banned the ubiquitous non-biodegradable plastic bag. And because the county is itself composed of islands, and thus has a natural barrier between it and the Hawaiian counties that have not yet instituted a ban, the beaches already seem cleaner. There are still the tossed-away coffee cups, abandoned flip-flops, empty sun block tubes and beer bottles, but the plastic bags are mostly gone.

### *Flotsam of civilization*

No more are the beach grasses and naupaka strewn with single-use plastic bags. They aren't caught in the thorns of the kiawe trees and the hedgerows, becoming part of the flotsam and jetsam of civilization that has littered the ditches, the verges of highways and once-pristine beaches with garbage. It's a small nod to the ugly fact that plastic is said to comprise half of ocean pollution.

Not everyone is happy about the ban. Without this source of free garbage bags, one has to buy the commercial brand or employ the paper bags now being given out by stores up and down the island. They are woefully inadequate for wet coffee grounds and soggy pineapple husks. And it's not just the grocery stores – it's every retail outlet, including restaurant take-outs. The giant Long's drugstore (everything from fishing tackle to liquor) reminds customers – as do most of the grocery stores – to remember to bring their own bags,

We came to Hawaii prepared, although my husband was skeptical the legislation passed in 2008 on Maui and 2009 on Kauai would actually come into effect, the tourist business being so vital to the economy of the Hawaiian Islands. But as I – and not he – do the packing, I came armed with reusable bags, from a sturdy Sobey's shopping bag to the Calgary Farmers' Market carrier; an eclectic assortment that included one from the University of Calgary bookstore and one from Safeway. I packed enough to get us through any amount of grocery shopping we'd have to do.

And the dirty little secret was that in the suitcases came a large collection of those ubiquitous plastic bags that seem to overflow the recycle bin in Calgary, not because I object to the decision of Maui County Council, but because I'm too cheap to buy garbage bags and Calgary's too weak to invoke a similar ban. It's not as if Maui is unique. Countries as diverse as France, China, Italy and Tanzania have banned one-use plastic bags. Ireland instituted a charge of 15 cents each and usage reportedly dropped 94 per cent in two weeks.

But Alberta doesn't seem ready to condemn this – or any other -petroleum byproduct. Yet if a place that is singularly dependent on the tourist trade and ensuring freezing Canadians return each year can make such an environmentally-friendly act work, why can our cities with their diversified economies not? There have been some attempts on the part of various Calgary stores to look – at least on the surface – as if they are being environmentally conscious. It is to laugh. Paying Shoppers Drug Mart five cents for a plastic bag has the effect not of making this customer think environmentally happy thoughts, but has her calculating the profit margin of selling a bag worth a fraction of a cent. It also makes the consumer cynical about the reasons for the charge, notwithstanding the stated green-tinged reasons parroted by the

clerks. If Shoppers was so concerned about the environment they would not have plastic bags available at all.

***Benefits of the ban***

And The Bay follows suit, although it was noticeable this past holiday season that the chain wasn't demanding money for bags in which to stuff Christmas purchases. This clearly has more to do with the five-cent per bag charge instituted in Toronto (where both The Bay and Shoppers are headquartered) in 2009, which the city's new mayor (the thankfully not-related Rob Ford) now wants to rescind. A few weeks on Maui is all it takes to get used to the idea of carrying one's own carrier bags and the benefits the ban has made.

And even someone with no environmental street creds to her name can see the future staring at her. She even has the grace to feel guilty about putting her garbage in "illegal" bags and taking it to the trash room under the cover of darkness.

*Channels: The Thompson Citizen, Mar. 16, 2011*