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Environment: PLASTIC PLAGUE PROMPTS TURTLE BAG CAMPAIGN

SPREP, ANZ, AQM, PFL save sea creatures

Asterio Takesy

The internationally renowned Pacific paradise of pristine beaches and forests is increasingly threatened by a plastic plague spreading across the region.

Coastlines are strewn with a myriad of light-weight plastic bags and other debris, marring the postcard-perfect image of the Pacific, as well as threatening marine life. Now, a unique partnership between the ANZ Bank in Samoa, the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), AQM supermarket and the Pacific Forum Line is trying to help turn that around.

It is estimated that each year around the world more than 100,000 sea animals, including turtles, die from eating, or being caught in plastic bags and other debris. Turtles were once hunted and revered in the Pacific as part of traditional cultural beliefs and subsistence living.

But increasing human populations, new fishing technology, plastic and other pollution, and loss of feeding and nesting habitats in the Pacific have devastated turtle populations.

One of the biggest human-induced threats to turtles is floating plastic debris in the ocean. Turtles often mistake floating plastic debris as food and baby turtles can get caught in discarded plastic tubing, plastic rings and other material.

Having a life-span of up to 1000 years, plastic bags are a nasty inheritance we leave that will not go away quickly.

With an increasing tourism revenue and a growing understanding that sustainable development is dependent on the industry, the public and government all co-operating, Pacific countries are trying innovative solutions to the plastic problem.

Some Pacific countries have banned, or are in the process of banning plastic bags. Vanuatu first banned plastic bags, introducing biodegradable bags into Port Vila.

Samoa is currently phasing in a ban that will make it illegal to sell light-weight single-use plastic bags. Under the proposed legislation, only bio-degradable plastic bags that comprise 50% corn starch will be legal.

French Polynesia has its "Bag for Life"—a re-usable shopping bag that is replaced by the supermarkets when it gets worn out.

Tuvalu and Papua New Guinea are also taking steps to manage the plastic bag plague.

While these policy instruments establish the legal framework for social change, behavioural change is also required at community level. We need to improve the understanding of how each of us are making little decisions that can save—or wreck—our world.

SPREP with ANZ Samoa, and other members of the private sector, have developed the Turtle Bag initiative that will introduce strong, stylish and reusable bags into supermarkets. The bag provides a sensible, affordable alternative to the single use plastic bags.

The Turtle Bags are based on the popular and highly effective Green Bag scheme of Australia and New Zealand that encourages re-use and a reduction in waste and litter. Made from polypropylene fibres, these bags can carry more shopping than plastic bags, have a lifespan of two to three years, and can be recycled where such facilities are available.

The Turtle Bag is an outcome of the Pacific Year of the Sea Turtle, a regional initiative by SPREP to refocus efforts to save the turtles of the Pacific. Six out of seven of the world's turtles are found in the

Pacific; with most of the world's turtles facing extinction, we have a shared responsibility to save these ancient creatures. An iconic species, turtles have a place deep within the lore, tradition and legend of the Pacific islands.

Support from key businesses has ensured the cost of the bags is kept to a minimum. Through the support of AQM, a Samoan distributor and supplier, the Turtle Bags will be available from Apia's key supermarkets for a standard cost, with shipping provided free through the Pacific Forum Line (PFL).

Sales of the bags will be supported through a targeted campaign, point-of-sale displays and education material.

A key element of the Turtle Bag initiative is the development of the ANZ Save the Turtle Fund.

From every Turtle Bag sold, ANZ Samoa will donate WST1.00 towards the fund, which will be disbursed to support community-based turtle conservation initiatives.

The Turtle Bag initiative aims to simultaneously reduce the number of plastic bags ending up in the ocean and strengthening community support for turtle conservation. It does this by fostering behavioural change by offering viable, sustainable and attractive alternatives to a serious environmental issue facing the region. This is the way of the future: responsible businesses, governments and the community working together to create a sustainable Pacific.

For more information visit SPREP's 2006 Year of the Sea Turtle website www.sprep.org/yost

- *Asterio Takesy is SPREP's director based in Apia, Samoa.*

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