

A person is shown from the waist down, holding several bags. They are wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, a brown leather belt, blue denim shorts, and blue and white sneakers. They are holding a light-colored leather tote bag with gold hardware and two brown paper shopping bags. The background is a wooden wall.

# PAPER BAGS, THE NATURAL CHOICE

| Josh Birch

There is increasing concern about the overuse of plastic bags and in particular, their contribution to marine litter. Australia and New Zealand governments and retailers have taken action by introducing bans, charges and other initiatives to limit their use. Paper bags present an attractive and practical alternative, due to their natural and renewable attributes.





## Society is Concerned About the Over-Consumption of Plastic

There has been growing recognition of the impact that single-use packaging, particularly plastic, has on the environment. There are concerns that little plastic packaging is recycled in Australia and New Zealand and that when discarded irresponsibly, plastics are a significant contributor to marine pollution. It has been widely reported that by the year 2050 there could be more plastic in the ocean than fish.

Between 2016–2017, almost 20% of rubbish found in Australia beaches was attributed to plastic bags and packaging, while paper and cardboard packaging made up less than 5%.

In New Zealand, plastic makes up 78% of rubbish on beaches which poses a high risk to the native wildlife. New Zealand is considered the 'sea bird capital of the world' and sea birds are more at risk of dying due to rubbish consumption than anywhere else in the world.

## Introducing Measures to Reduce Consumption of Lightweight Plastic Carrier Bags

Australia has enacted various measures to try to reduce consumption of plastic bags and packaging, with each state and territory committing to the ban of lightweight plastic bags after South Australia led the way in 2009. The New Zealand government banned single-use plastic shopping bags in 2019, and has committed to phasing out single-use plastics completely by 2025.

These measures have encouraged consumers to reuse their shopping bags and retailers to seek alternatives to traditional, non-biodegradable plastic. Since the introduction of these measures, there have been visible reductions in plastic pollution. According to CSIRO, plastic on Australian beaches has reduced by a third in the past nine years. There is not yet enough data to suggest the same for New Zealand at this time, however research does continue.





## Paper Bags are the Attractive Alternative

The raw material for paper bags, pulp, is a renewable and sustainable resource. In Australia and New Zealand, paper comes from managed regrowth forests or planted forests where the cycle of planting, growing and harvesting is carefully controlled. Australia alone has two million hectares of planted forests and growing, and New Zealand has 1.6 million hectares.

Even if a paper bag is irresponsibly discarded, due to its natural compostable characteristics it will have a relatively low impact. That said, contrary to popular belief, paper bags can be very robust. Kraft paper is especially developed for demanding packaging. Due to its long and strong virgin fibres, it has a high level of mechanical strength. The choice of glue and a proficient construction of the handles add even more to the bag's strength and durability.

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Paper bags are manufactured from a wide variety of fibre types dependent on what they are being designed to carry. Paper bags made of recycled or, a hybrid of new and recycled fibre is a cost-efficient option for non-food packaging applications required to carry less weight e.g., shoe or textiles/clothing.

The natural attributes of paper also resonate with consumers. According to research by Two Sides, 69% of Australian respondents prefer paper and cardboard packaging because it is better for the environment, 72% like it because it is compostable, and 50% prefer it for being easier to recycle. A study by Consumer NZ showed that New Zealanders are growing frustrated by excessive plastic packaging and prefer the recyclable aspects of paper and cardboard.

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## How Paper Bags Compare Environmentally

While textile bags, such as those made from cotton, are undoubtedly robust, research suggests that they need to be reused at least 50 times to achieve the same climate change performance as paper.

Comparisons to other heavier materials, such as those used in fashion retail or supermarket 'bags for life', suggest that paper bags can be comparable or even better than plastic alternatives in terms of carbon footprint. Of course, less overall consumption is highly necessary for society to meet the global climate challenges and the reuse of all types of bags, whatever their construction, is to be strongly encouraged.

Paper bags are easily reused and recycled, and made with renewable resources from sustainably managed forests. They are the natural choice for consumers and retailers.



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