

AUSTRALIA: August 3, 2004

**SYDNEY - The tiny Australian seaside town of Huskisson, perched on the edge of glittering Jervis Bay and fringed by pristine national parks, has signed up for the global battle against the humble plastic bag.**

The former whaling settlement, whose waters are a major draw for divers and dolphin watchers, is one of an increasing number of Australian towns to outlaw plastic bags and help slash the seven billion bags the country's 20 million people use each year.

"It was really about protecting our own backyard for not only ourselves, but for the million-odd visitors that come here each year. People just thought it absolutely made sense," said Matt Cross, coordinator of the project in Huskisson, population 750, about 112 miles south of Sydney.

Shoppers around the world use tens of billions of plastic bags every year. Environmentalists say normal plastic bags can take up to 1,000 years to disintegrate, although industry groups argue the bags make up only a small percentage of global litter.

But environmentalists say the growing problem posed by plastic bag pollution can no longer be ignored.

Even remote Himalayan foothills are now strewn with thousands of used bags and in South Africa they have become such a common eyesore they are dubbed "roadside daisies," prompting a campaign to exterminate the "national flower."

Sacred cows roaming India's streets have died after chewing bags containing scraps of food, while thousands of turtles, birds and other marine animals are killed each year after mistaking the millions of bags in the world's oceans for squid and jellyfish.

"We've had plastic bags since the 1960s and initially they seemed like a great idea, lightweight, low energy needed to make them. Then the dead animals starting washing up on beaches," said John Dee, from environmental group Planet Ark.

But discarded plastic bags do more than just kill animals.

In Bangladesh they were blamed for clogging drains in the capital Dhaka, contributing toward deadly flooding in the low-lying country. The government has since banned the 10 million plastic bags used each day in the country in a bid to alleviate the problem.

"Disposal of bags is creating havoc in urban areas. Environmentally speaking, plastic is more suitable for long life products like pipelines," said Chandra Bhushan, associate director at India's Center for Science and Environment.