

# Plastics ban in the Red Sea



Egypt's Red Sea governorate is banning the use of single-use plastic bags and other items in a bid to clean up the environment, reports Nesmahar Sayed

Checking into my room at the resort of El Gouna on the Red Sea recently, my eye caught a message on the laundry bag. "Please put your laundry for washing and dry cleaning in this bag and your order in the pocket provided. This bag is environmentally friendly and will be re-used. Signed, Environmental Team," it said.

Speaking at a later three-day workshop for journalists organised by the Cairo Climate Talks (CCT) platform called "Communication Climate Change: The Challenges of Environmental Journalism in the Times of Social Media", hotel manager Gérard Hanssen said that the new policy was being implemented in many hotels in the area.

"The hotel received a certificate confirming that it was the first hotel in Hurghada to undertake reducing the amount of one-use plastic items. In line with a decision by the governor, we have been removing or replacing all one-use plastics with organic materials or more complicated polymer plastics," he said.

On 1 April, the Red Sea Governor Ahmed Abdallah issued a decree saying that "the ban on the single-use of plastic bags will apply to any food-related outlets like restaurants, coffee shops, supermarkets, groceries, butchers, fisheries, and to beverages in restaurants and coffee shops, as well as on safaris and boats. Plastic knives, hooks, cups and dishes are also banned except for heavy duty garbage bags. The governorate will also not authorise plans to produce plastic bags within the area."

Hanssen told participants at the workshop about his experience with this initiative. "Plastic straws were replaced with paper straws, wooden spoons replaced plastic ones, plastic chairs were replaced with bamboo chairs, warning signs were wooden instead of plastic, and there were real plants instead of artificial ones," he said.

The guests appreciated the drive, with one guest saying that even though he missed the plastic containers he still appreciated the initiative. While the replacements can cost more money, Hanssen said that this was not the main priority. "It is our business, and we invest in it. The reefs are about 50m from the hotel, and it is very sad to see plastic in the sea, damaging the future of our children."

One hotelier in Sharm El-Sheikh asked Hanssen about moving towards a plastic-free hotel at the seminar. He replied that "one of the most effective campaigns is organised by the Red Sea Hotels Say No to Plastic, Protect the Red Sea, Say No to Plastic Straws Campaign, set up because it is estimated that more than one million sea birds, 100,000 marine mammals, and countless fish are killed by plastic pollution each year."

"Straws are one of the top 10 pieces of garbage pollution. You use a straw for five minutes, and it takes 500 years to decompose. Join us as we take the initiative and fight for change. Nobody needs plastic straws," Hanssen said.

For his part, Abdallah said that the hotels in the area had been cooperative in implementing the decree. The decision was taken because tourism in the Red Sea region is a main industry, and the environment is a main component of its capital and the appeal of tourist resorts. "Saving the environment is unpaid capital and a main part of paid capital at the same time. Tourists will not come to an unhealthy environment," he said.

The decision joins another banning the licensing of

factories on the Red Sea coast. According to Abdallah, though the government is promoting the building of wind farms to generate electricity, in the Red Sea it is committed to less invasive solar plants.

Grey water, or wastewater, is also used to water trees in the area that are not otherwise thriving in order to increase the amount of oxygen produced during daylight hours to balance the CO2 that comes from vehicles, according to Abdallah.

"Trees also improve the visual image of the governorate," he added.

**COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT:** Abdallah said that the proposals were submitted by the Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA), and that civil society was a partner in all the activities.

"The hardest part in this initiative is implementing the decree on the ground. The decree was issued last April and implemented on 1 June. During the month in between, awareness campaigns took place among shop owners,

chain-store owners, and plastic bag merchants to find alternatives for single-use bags," he said.

Heba Shawki, managing director at HEPCA, appreciated the governor's decree saying that "the governor has shown great support for HEPCA's activities and proposals. This decision has environmental and health angles, and it makes the Red Sea governorate the cleanest it has been for 10 years."

She said that 15,000 reusable bags had been distributed among local residents, each carrying 22kg. Some 10,000 paper bags were distributed in supermarkets for sale at between LE2 and LE5.

Committees have been organised to collect single-use plastic bags from markets. A permit period will be in force until the end of this month, and then decisions could be made to close shops if single-use bags are still found in the market. "Shops will be closed if they insist on using single-use plastic bags as this is a violation of the law on the environment," Abdallah said.

Hurghada was ranked among the world's top 25 tourist

destinations in 2018.

The question arises whether the decree will continue to be implemented if Abdallah leaves his post. "No one can remove an administrative decree after it has been implemented for 90 days," he said.

"You have been making news headlines worldwide and especially in Germany with your ground-breaking decision to ban single-use plastic in your governorate," Philippe Maupai, an official at the German Embassy in Cairo, told Abdallah.

"Indeed, several major TV channels and newspapers have reported this decision in Germany, and I can assure you that this is an excellent argument for Germans to visit the beautiful cities of the Red Sea," he added.

Maupai said that supermarkets and businesses were now required by law to stop giving out and using single-use plastic bags in the governorate, meaning that they would now use more environmentally friendly alternatives like paper bags or reusable tote bags instead.

He said that people consuming food could no longer use very harmful plastic straws, plastic cutlery or plastic cups. They would now use reusable or recyclable alternatives made of metal, wood or glass, he said. This would be a huge step forward for protecting the environment.

Maupai explained to Abdallah that "Germany shares your concerns for the environment, and we are very much engaged in reducing the use of plastic in Europe. Many Germans were shocked by recent pictures of turtles found with plastic straws stuck in their noses or whales with stomachs full of plastic bags."

"We all have a responsibility to reduce plastic waste and to protect our environment. Not only will this help protect wildlife all around the world, but it will also have a very positive impact on tourism. If the beaches are clean and the coral reefs and marine animals are healthy, more people will surely want to visit these areas," he said.

"The initiative of the governor of the Red Sea to ban single-use plastics is a great step forward in the field of environmental protection and also an asset for tourists visiting the Red Sea governorate. I welcome His Excellency's plans to work with decision-makers all over Egypt to spread this initiative to the entire country," Maupai told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

However, the hardest part can be to change people's mentalities, and while heading back to Cairo I met Zohri Abbadi, 31, from Qena who works in El Gouna. He was carrying sandwiches in a single-use plastic bag.

"Haven't you heard about the governor's decision," I asked him. He said the initiative was a good one, but he had bought the sandwiches from a distant store and not a supermarket. "Next time I will not buy food from the store if the owner insists on using single-use plastic bags," he said.

For Moodi Gamal, 32, living in Hurghada, the initiative may not work in local markets, however. "It is not proper for a man to carry a bag and walk with it to a store," he said.

Mohamed Abdel-Fattah, 28, another worker in the area, said it was a very good and healthy initiative. He suggested that the decision should also be implemented in his hometown of Aswan.

"I wish these environmentally friendly bags could be sold for a reasonable price, however, as I cannot afford to buy a lot of reusable bags for LE7 a piece," he said.



photo: Nesmahar Sayed