



As Europe is trying to find ways to reduce plastic use, a look south may just be in place. In fact, many African countries started banning plastic bags already a decade ago.

Plastic bags were, and are, a major concern on the continent, as some [100 million plastic bags](#) are handed out every year by supermarkets in Kenya alone. Long identified as a major cause of environmental damage and health problems, they kill birds, fish and other animals that mistake them for food. They damage agricultural land, pollute tourist sites and provide breeding grounds for the mosquitoes that carry malaria and dengue fever.

In mid-March this year - just three weeks after the UN declared a “war on plastic” through its new [Clean Seas initiative](#) - The Government of Kenya [announced](#) a ban on the use, manufacture and import of all plastic bags.

Kenya, however, [wasn’t even close to being the first African country](#) to ban plastic. Over 15 African countries have either banned or taxed the use of plastic shopping bags,

Rwanda being one of the first countries in the world to ban plastic shopping bags in 2004.

Rwanda was followed, with bans and/or taxations, by Eritrea in 2005, Tanzania in 2006, Uganda and Botswana in 2007, and Senegal in 2015. In 2013, Mauritania plastic bag manufacturers can be jailed for up to a year.

South Africa, Cameroon, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Ethiopia and Malawi are also among the African countries that have limited the use, adopted or announced bans on the use of plastic shopping bags.

“Kenya is taking decisive action to remove an ugly stain on its outstanding natural beauty,” [said](#) Erik Solheim, Head of UN Environment. “Plastic waste also causes immeasurable damage to fragile ecosystems - both on land and at sea - and this decision is a major breakthrough in our global effort to turn the tide on plastic.

“Kenya should be commended for its environmental leadership. It's a great example that I hope will inspire others, and help drive further commitments to the Clean Seas campaign.”

Today, [Kenya](#) is the 11th country to take action in support of the UN Environment campaign.

What about Europe? It seems like it's only just starting its path towards a plastic-free future. [Italy](#) became the first European country to ban the sale of non-biodegradable plastic bags from January 2011. In May 2015, France [approved](#) a bill that would ban plastic bags in all supermarkets and stores, starting from January 1, 2016. France has also passed a new law banning all plastic cutlery, coming into effect 2020. After that, all plastic cups, cutlery and plates must be made of biologically-sourced materials.

Today Europe is, however, striving to create [new legislation](#) covering all member states. In April 2015, The European Parliament approved rules which would

[require](#)

member states to reduce the use of plastic shopping bags by some [80 percent by 2025](#)

The states will have a choice of which route to take to achieve the set target: The first choice is for shoppers to reduce the use of “non-biodegradable plastic bags to 90 lightweight bags per citizen by the end of 2019 and 40 by the end of 2025,” the EU Parliament press release [reads](#) . The second choice is to just stop giving out plastic bags over the counter completely by the end of 2018.

"This legislation will create a genuine win-win situation" [said](#) Margrete Auken (Greens/EFA, DK), who is steering the legislation through Parliament. "We're talking about an immense environmental problem", she said, adding that there will also be huge economic benefits: "740 million euros per annum, according to the Commission's own calculations, will be saved".

In comparison with Africa, Europe might have lagged behind for a while, but Europe is showing its power as a continent of innovations, creating solutions to reduce the use of plastics. There are several good news this year from one Nordic country – Finland – where [a plastic-free carton](#) and [biodegradable plastics](#) are about to make a breakthrough.

The nature itself also seems to have quite an unexpected small-scale solution, as it turns out [mealworms](#) can digest plastics.

While still waiting for large-scale innovations, why not just skip plastic bags during your next shopping, knowing that [more than 8 million tonnes of plastic](#) leak into the ocean each year – equal to dumping a garbage truck of plastic every minute.