

SeaWorld theme parks to get rid of plastic shopping bags

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By **Jason Garcia**, Orlando Sentinel

SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment will eliminate plastic shopping bags at all of its theme parks, a move the company says will keep an estimated 4 million bags a year from ending up in landfills as garbage or in [the environment](#) as litter.

SeaWorld will instead offer souvenir shoppers [free](#) paper bags made from 100 percent recycled paper or company-branded reusable bags that sell for anywhere from \$1.49 to \$9.95 apiece.

Industry experts say Orlando-based SeaWorld, whose 10 parks drew a combined 23.6 million visitors last year, is the first major theme-park chain to move away from plastic shopping bags. The thin bags are a prominent source of pollution — including in oceans, where they can kill marine animals that ingest them.

"It would not surprise me at all if this sets a trend that is followed throughout the industry," said Dennis Spiegel, president of International Theme Park Services, an industry consulting firm in Cincinnati.

SeaWorld plans to announce the move today, just ahead of Friday's grand opening of a new sea-turtle attraction and habitat in SeaWorld Orlando dubbed "TurtleTrek."

"This is a significant change for our company, one we hope will provide a model for our industry overall," [Jim Atchison](#), president and chief executive officer of SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment, said in a prepared statement.

Jane Tebbe-Shemelya, SeaWorld Parks' [vice president](#) for merchandise, said in an interview that switching from plastic shopping bags to recycled paper ones will cost the company several hundred thousand dollars a year.

She said the decision reflects SeaWorld's commitment to [environmental preservation](#). The company says plastic bags contribute to the more than 1.4 billion tons of trash that wind up in the world's oceans every year.

"We're continuously looking at opportunities and ways to advance our efforts around environmental commitments," Tebbe-Shemelya said. "We really looked at our whole supply chain."

Paper bags can pose challenges for theme parks. [Walt Disney World](#) says it has considered switching to paper but has found that plastic bags are more durable and that humidity can make it difficult to adequately store paper bags.

Both Disney and Universal Orlando say they take steps to make their plastic shopping bags environmentally conscious, such as by using recyclable plastic or printing messages on the bags encouraging shoppers to reuse them.

SeaWorld began testing a paper-only bag policy last year at SeaWorld San Diego, where the plastic ban was also timed to coincide with the opening of a new sea-turtle attraction there. Tebbe-Shemelya said the park hasn't run into any logistical problems, though she said paper bags take up a bit more storage space.

"We've had a really smooth transition in California," she said.

SeaWorld's Orlando parks, which also include **Discovery Cove** and **Aquatica**, will cease distributing plastic bags this week. The remainder of its theme parks — including a third SeaWorld in San Antonio and **Busch Gardens** parks in **Tampa** and Williamsburg, Va. — will follow suit in the coming months.

Tebbe-Shemelya said SeaWorld aims to be entirely free of plastic shopping bags within about a year, though the exact timing will depend on how quickly parks exhaust their existing inventories.

John Gerner, managing director of Leisure [Business](#) Advisors, a consulting firm in Richmond, Va., said he expects the incremental costs that SeaWorld incurs will be more than offset by what the company gains in corporate goodwill.

An environmentally friendly reputation is especially valuable to SeaWorld, which has long prided itself on supporting wildlife conservation-and-rescue efforts. The company says it has rescued more than 20,000 orphaned, injured or ill animals during the past 40 years and has contributed more than \$50 million to environmental initiatives around the world.

The conservation work also helps buttress SeaWorld against attacks from animal-right activists who are critical of its practice of maintaining captive populations of large marine mammals, particularly killer whales.

Sometimes changes such as the switch in shopping bags can turn out to be more difficult to implement than anticipated. In 2008, for example, SeaWorld laid out plans to replace the plastic flatware in all of its parks with cutlery made of renewable and biodegradable resources such as vegetable starches and bamboo. But it had to revert to conventional plastic utensils and Styrofoam containers in part because the newer items weren't durable enough.

Some of those environmentally conscious items remain, including napkins made from recycled fiber and vegetable-based inks. And SeaWorld says it recently introduced new drinking cups, made of 85 percent renewable resources, as part of a new [marketing](#) deal with Coca-Cola Co.