



# Is it time to halt the rising tide of plastic packaging?

**A** Close up, plastic packaging can be a marvellous thing. Those who make a living from it call it a forgotten infrastructure that allows modern urban life to exist. Plastics have helped society defy natural limits such as the seasons, the rotting of food and the distance most of us live from where our food is produced. And yet we do not like it. Partly we do not like waste, but plastic waste, with its hydrocarbon roots and industrial manufacture, is especially galling. In 2008, the UK, for example, produced around two million tonnes of plastic waste, twice as much as in the early 1990s. The very qualities of plastic – its cheapness, its indestructible aura – make it a reproachful symbol of an unsustainable way of life. The facts, however, do not justify our unease. All plastics are, at least theoretically, recyclable. Plastic packaging makes up just 6 to 7 per cent of the contents of British dustbins by weight and less than 3 per cent of landfill. Supermarkets and brands, which are under pressure to reduce the quantity of packaging of all types that they use, are finding good environmental reasons to turn

to plastic: it is lighter, so requires less energy for transportation than glass, for example; it requires relatively little energy to produce; and it is often re-usable. An Austrian study found that if plastic packaging were removed from the supply chain, other packaging would have to increase fourfold to make up for it.

**B** So are we just wrong about plastic packaging? Is it time to stop worrying and learn to love the disposable plastic wrapping around sandwiches? Certainly there are bigger targets for environmental savings such as improving household insulation and energy emissions. Naturally, the plastics industry is keen to point them out. What's more, concern over plastic packaging has produced a squall of conflicting initiatives from retailers, manufacturers and local authorities. It's a squall that dies down and then blows harder from one month to the next. 'It is being left to the individual conscience and supermarkets playing the market,' says Tim Lang, a professor specialising in food policy. 'It's a mess.'

- C** Dick Searle of the Packaging Federation points out that societies without sophisticated packaging lose half their food before it reaches consumers and that in the UK, waste in supply chains is about 3 per cent. In India, it is more than 50 per cent. The difference comes later: the British throw out 30 per cent of the food they buy – an environmental cost in terms of emissions equivalent to a fifth of the cars on their roads. Packagers agree that cardboard, metals and glass all have their good points, but there's nothing quite like plastic. With more than 20 families of polymers to choose from and then sometimes blend, packaging designers and manufacturers have a limitless variety of qualities to play with.
- D** But if there is one law of plastic that, in environmental terms at least, prevails over all others, it is this: a little goes a long way. This means, first, that plastic is relatively cheap to use – it represents just over one-third of the UK packaging market by value but it wraps more than half the total number of items bought. Second, it means that even though plastic encases about 53 per cent of products bought, it only makes up 20 per cent by weight of the packaging consumed. And in the packaging equation, weight is the main issue because the heavier something is, the more energy you expend moving it around. In view of this, righteous indignation against plastic can look foolish.
- E** One store commissioned a study to find precise data on which had less environmental impact: selling apples loose or ready-wrapped. Helene Roberts, head of packaging, explains that in fact they found apples in fairs on a tray covered by plastic film needed 27 per cent less packaging in transportation than those sold loose. Steve Kelsey, a packaging designer, finds the debate frustrating. He argues that the hunger to do something quickly is diverting effort away from more complicated questions about how you truly alter supply chains. Rather than further reducing the weight of a plastic bottle, more thought should be given to how packaging can be recycled. Helene Roberts explains that their greatest packaging reduction came when the company switched to re-usable plastic crates and stopped consuming 62,000 tonnes of cardboard boxes every year. Plastic packaging is important, and it might provide a way of thinking about broader questions of sustainability. To target plastic on its own is to evade the complexity of the issues. There seems to be a universal eagerness to condemn plastic. Is this due to an inability to make the general changes in society that are really required? 'Plastic as a lightweight food wrapper is now built in as the logical thing,' Lang says. 'Does that make it an environmentally sound system of packaging? It only makes sense if you have a structure such as exists now. An environmentally driven packaging system would look completely different.' Dick Searle put the challenge another way. 'The amount of packaging used today is a reflection of modern life.'