

## Degradable bags 'can last years'

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Misleading and extravagant claims were being made about "degradable" plastic bags and their use could be harming the environment, an expert warns.

The bags, which contain a chemical that eventually breaks down the plastic, are widely available at independent supermarkets such as Ritchies, and the plastic is also used to make some garbage and courier bags.

They have become a popular alternative with some retailers, amid Government efforts to tackle Australia's 6.9-billion-a-year plastic bag problem.

Professor Greg Lonergan, an Australian expert on the biodegradability of plastic, told The Age he had tested many of the bags and found the manufacturers' claims to be extravagant.

"Generally, our experience (at the Swinburne University of Technology) testing degradable bags has been very poor," he said. "At this stage, if a bag says it is degradable I would treat that as meaningless - I would treat it as a normal bag.

"The public have a perception that bags with the word 'degradable' means they will disappear quite quickly and that's not the case," he said.

Professor Lonergan said that "degradable" was misleading, because everything eventually degrades, even if it takes hundreds or thousands of years, which may be the case with plastic. The question, he said, was how long it took to degrade. Tests at Swinburne showed the bags could last more than five years.

Canadian company EPI, the major supplier of degradable plastic in Australia, said a bag will not start to break down for 18 to 24 months. After that, it depended on how much it was exposed to sunlight and stress.

EPI chief executive Joseph Gho said the company had not done thorough tests under Australian conditions, but it was thought the bags would break down after three or four months if under direct Queensland sun.

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- **Greg Lonergan**, Swinburne professor

"We've taken 10 to 12 years developing this technology and we've employed some world-class scientists to work with us, in the areas of degradability and biodegradability," said Mr Gho.

There are other problems with this type of plastic. An expert report to the federal Environment Department last year found these types of "oxo-biodegradable" bags break down into smaller pieces of plastic that "might make them more attractive to smaller animals such as sea turtle hatchlings".

The report The impacts of degradable plastic bags in Australia, also said the bags can contaminate the kerbside recycling of plastics, as the active chemical works to weaken and destabilise plastic.

Professor Lonergan's comments come after the Federal Court last month found misleading claims were made about Earthstrength bags, widely available in supermarkets. Distributor Lloyd Brooks was ordered to stop supplying the bags, which it claimed would biodegrade in 28 days, and later admitted they could take years to biodegrade.