

ENDANGERED SPECIES

More than 100,000 marine mammals and one million birds reportedly die each year from ingesting plastic bags and plastic products.

WORDS BY STEPHANIE HUNT

Passionate about the ecology of the world heritage environment where she lives, 14 year old Olivia Illidge has a vision, a bag-busting plan and the written support of 114 primary school children, 616 adults, three Magnetic Island associations and local and state politicians.

Moved by the death of a crocodile that was captured on Magnetic Island in 2009 which died from plastic bag ingestion, Olivia decided to take action. "I like our wildlife, including crocodiles and I was shocked that this one died with 25 plastic bags in its stomach. I knew I needed to do something about this," recalls Olivia with the determination that got the support of an entire community.

"I wanted the petition to be from kids. I thought it would be better coming from the future generation that would have to deal with the fallout" – *Olivia Illidge*.

Olivia approached the president of the Magnetic Island Nature Care Association (MINCA) and they drew up a petition for Olivia to present to her fellow primary school students at Magnetic Island State School. "I wanted the petition to be from kids. I thought it would be better coming from the future generation that would have to deal with the fallout from continued plastic bag use," she explains.

Two thirds of Olivia's fellow students signed the petition that she presented to the Townsville City Council in an attempt to legally ban plastic bag use on the island. To back up her efforts, MINCA produced another petition signed by residents and visitors that was also presented to Council.

The response was mixed but encouraging and Olivia, along with three friends and councillor Vern Veitch canvassed the retailers on Magnetic Island to determine if they would support the ban. "For the plan to work, they would have to support it. Of all the shops we visited, only two were not supportive. They had both just ordered enough plastic bags for the next twelve months."

As Olivia made the transition from primary school to high school, she knew she needed more support and MINCA formed a subcommittee to help. "We named ourselves Bag-Busters and planned the elements of a campaign using a toolkit from Victoria. We also borrowed ideas from the quit smoking campaign because we thought plastic bag use was an addiction and needed to be treated like one."

Preliminary scoping, planning, assessment and consultation is now complete. To move to the implementation phase, Bag-Busters needs to recruit campaign partners and raise around \$55,000 to educate retailers, residents and visitors to the island about the environmental cost of single-use plastic bags, inform people about the changes on the island and assemble a supply of reusable bags so everyone can collect one to get started.

"We will be applying for funding shortly and plan to launch the campaign later in the year. In the meantime, we hope people will reconsider their use of plastic bags and not bring them to Magnetic Island," says Olivia with the sweet-faced sincerity that has brought the Bag-Busters campaign to the cusp of fruition. **CL**

FACT FILE

According to estimates Australians use almost seven billion plastic bags a year. More than 500 billion are used worldwide.

It costs the Australian government \$4m to clean up plastic bag litter each year.

It costs \$4000 to recycle one tonne of plastic bags.

Plastic bag use is banned or restricted in 25 percent of the world.

South Australia was the first state in Australia to ban the use of lightweight, checkout style plastic bags.