

Christmas that wont cost the Earth

Earth First

by Neil Jones, ECCO

Christmas is traditionally a time of giving, but it is also a period of big spending on presents, food, beverages, parties, travel, and holidays. Figures from the Australian Retailers Association show that Australian adults spend between \$500 and \$1000 on Christmas presents alone.

All of this festive consumption has significant implications for the environment also. The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) produced a report in 2005 titled 'The Hidden Cost of Christmas', which outlines the impact of Christmas spending in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, pollution, water consumption, land disturbance, waste, transport, and the volume of materials used.

The ACF's Consumption Atlas has shown that it is through the products and services bought each year that Australian households make our greatest contribution to climate change, due to the embodied energy and water in these manufactured items, and associated transportation costs. In addition to excess consumption, unfortunately the festive season is also a time of wastage – with food going uneaten and unwanted gifts going unused.

Christmas cards are also a major waste item. While they are always nice to give and receive, they are made from paper or plastic and require transportation around the world. This results in the production of millions of tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions each year. Rather than posting paper cards, perhaps consider e-cards for your personalised Christmas messages.

We regularly hear of financial hangovers in January when we realise how much money has been spent over the Christmas period, but all this festive spending and wastage translates in a big hangover for the planet, and that's nothing to celebrate.

Let's lighten the impact of this year's festive season and make New Year's resolutions to shop locally, reduce waste, and behave with an environmental conscience.

Top Green-home festive season tips

1. Buy a service, not a product - to reduce embodied greenhouse emissions and water. For example, buy someone a voucher for a massage, rather than a massaging appliance. Other examples include vouchers for services, film tickets, or theatre tickets.

2. Buy gifts that 'give-to-many', Give your friends and family membership to charities, overseas aid groups, or environment/community organisations. Examples:

membership to charities, ACF, Oxfam, Unwrapped Christmas gifts. Alternatively, donate to not-for-profit organisations.

3. Think 'green' when you buy and recycle Christmas items rather than send them to landfill. Look for recycled and recyclable products, minimal packaging, certified organic chemical-free products, and those that are made locally, and made to last.

4. Think 'local' - buy food that is grown close to home to reduce food miles, with the exception of items which are FairTrade accredited - sometimes it's better to buy things like coffee, chocolate and rice which are produced overseas under FairTrade conditions. The same applies for gifts - support local industries and artists.

5. Use recycled wrapping paper, or re-use paper from gifts that friends have given you. Make cards yourself, from recycled paper and re-used magazine images. Alternatively, e-cards are a great way to cut down on your carbon footprint.

6. Reduce the amount of gifts you need to buy by organising a 'Kris Kringle' with family and friends, and buy good quality items even if they cost more (rather than buying lots of cheaper less durable items).

7. Buy carbon offsetting - you can choose the amount you want to spend, and offset someone's car travel, household energy use or airline travel, one-off or for a year. Make sure you encourage the recipient to reduce their energy use too! Read tips and advice about carbon offsetting schemes.

8. Get a really green Christmas tree: go for an Australian native tree in a pot which you can use year after year, or can plant in the garden after Christmas. Tips: support the campaign to revive the native Wollemi Pine, an endangered Australian native which makes a great Christmas tree!

9. Eco-decorate your house for the festive season with home-made decorations, flowers or FairTrade decorations bought from charity shops. Avoid buying single-use decorations which will only end up in landfill after Christmas.

10. If you're going away on holiday, try to reduce the distance travelled - go for a location closer to home and take the train rather than flying. Select a carbon offset option available from most transport providers.

Enjoy the Christmas period with peace-of-mind that your choices and decisions won't cost the earth.