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With Christmas gifts, less can be more

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NCR Today

This Green living essay from Sheryl Eisenberg of the Natural Resources Defense Council offers good tips on green gift giving this Christmas season.

"I can still remember virtually every gift I received in childhood, not because the gifts were so special, but because they were so few. Though I was a comfortable child of the post-war boom, the times were thrifty compared to today. I never had more than a few dolls, stuffed animals, board games, crayons, records, books, a bike and a sled. And that was enough, more than enough, yet not so much more that I didn't appreciate each and every item -- and enjoy it to the end of its useful life, or my childhood, whichever came first.

What middle class American child can say the same today? Our kids are so inundated with playthings, they need bins and chests and extra closets to store them all. And we adults are equally awash in our grown-up toys.

Nevertheless, this holiday season, we will rush to the stores, actual and virtual, to buy more for our kids and each other. What gives?

That the shopping frenzy is inconsistent with the spiritual and communal essence of the holidays is an old subject. I recently came across a reference to it in *Howard's End*, a wonderful story from 1910 that takes place in England, from which I gathered that not only isn't commercialization of the holidays new, it's not even uniquely American. The only point worth noting in 2006 is that the situation is worse than ever, and not just because we are increasingly out of touch with the meaning of the holidays (of all faiths). Our heedless extravagance has environmental costs that are steep and growing.

The world's population is currently using 25 percent more resources each year than the earth can generate

in that time, according to the latest Living Planet Report by the World Wildlife Fund. And that figure is projected to rise to 200 percent in the next 50 years if we don't change course.

Do you wonder how it's possible to consume more than the earth produces? We manage it by living off our capital -- the resources that it's taken tens or hundreds or, in the case of fossil fuels, millions of years to accumulate. And you know what happens when you live off your capital.

Though by no means the only offenders, Americans are among the worst (#2 on the list, after the United Arab Emirates). Our average per capita "ecological footprint" is over four times bigger than the earth can afford. While our seasonal lavishness isn't the only reason, it does contribute largely to the problem.

But enough of this grinchiness. No one wants to give up on the holidays or the sense of abundance that the season bestows. The only question is how to be generous without bankrupting the earth. Here are some thoughts.

Give things people need and can use, rather than products plucked from the shelves simply because they look good.

Choose gifts made of sustainable materials -- bamboo rather than wood, hemp, organic cotton and wool, fleece made from recycled soda bottles, post-consumer recycled paper, natural cosmetics and organic, fair-trade chocolates and coffees.

Buy locally made products, as the energy used to transport goods to the stores is one of the huge, hidden environmental costs of the holidays.

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Look for used things with a provenance. Old books and maps, retro clothing, antique jewelry and the like are one-of-a-kind gifts that collectors and aficionados will appreciate.

Give things that reduce energy usage, such as commuter bicycles, solar-powered products, battery rechargers and carbon offsets.

Avoid excessively packaged products. The packaging wastes resources without adding value and, if made from plastic, can release toxins after being discarded.

Give tickets for concerts, shows, museums, sporting events, outdoor activities or parks.

Give a party rather than presents -- and tell your guests that the party's gift-free.

Give of yourself. Promise a shift of babysitting or dog-walking or a service that uses your special talents or skills, such as a webpage, a bridge lesson or home improvement help.

Give a Good Card. It's like a gift card, but instead of enabling recipients to get something for themselves with the card, it lets them contribute to a favorite charity or cause through Network for Good.

Most important, remember that the greatest gift of the season is the holidays themselves. It's the one time of year when society permits you -- indeed, encourages you -- to escape from the daily hurly-burly and experience the meaning and poetry of life. Don't miss the chance.

-- Sheryl Eisenberg

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