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Shop locally and 'go green' this holiday season



Natural Selections
Mike Weilbacher

NATURAL SELECTIONS Mike Weilbacher so this is Christmas," goes the John Lennon classic, and an interesting one it is, as hand-wringing over the economy has severely dampened the Yuletide cheer. But the holiday arrives like clockwork, and families gather to celebrate the completion of another year.

Kids being kids, of course, they can't (and shouldn't) wait for the day.

Even with the year's grim economic news, interest in green gifts - a huge fad starting last year - continues unabated, and there are literally a million ways you can give creative, fun, memorable presents that have a net-positive impact on the

ecological systems that sustain us.

Forthwith, here's a bunch: First, as the Ardmore Initiative loves to point out, the greenest gifts are ones purchased locally. It's so true: Locally purchased gifts require less fossil fuels to get to your door, which reduces your carbon footprint and cools the planet.

This Friday is First Friday up and down the Main Line - patronizing these stores is a great green activity.

And those dollars also stay local. Buying from a small merchant on Lancaster Avenue, your dollar stays in the local economy - in fact, one study showed when you purchase products from a mom and-pop store, that dollar cycles through the local economy an astonishing seven times, as the store buys inventory, pays clerks who buy lunch at the deli next door, and so on. Buy at a big chain? That dollar only cycles through the local economy twice before departing to the chain's headquarters in some distant city. Buying locally reverberates through the entire economy's ecosystem.

Switching gears, another deep-green gift is one made from reused products - not recycled, but reused. The difference? Recycled materials are melted down and turned into something new, a process that saves materials but requires energy and water. Reused objects save tons on energy and water, again lowering that carbon footprint, the Holy Grail of our time.

Sweet Mabel's in Narberth, for example, offers a multitude of reused gifts - and it's local. So here's a homegrown gift shop featuring wild things like clocks pressed from classic rock albums, cuff links made from typewriter keys, goblets formed from soda and beer bottles, purses produced from reclaimed inner tubes and candy wrappers, wine bottle stoppers cleverly crafted from door-knobs, of all things, and even beautiful, colorful baskets hand-woven from telephone wire by Zulu women. (OK, a Zulu hand basket is not local, but it does contribute to the creation of sustainable economies in Third World countries - not a bad reason to think globally as well.)

On the Web, a Google search for recycled and green gifts offers an ocean of possibilities to wade through. Great Green Goods lists jewelry made from recycled flip flops, of all things, plus tree decorations crafted from recycled oxygen containers found on Mt. Everest and Santas cut from Dr. Pepper cans. Eco-Artware presents bracelets from vintage watch faces and subway tokens.

Uncommon Goods provides wine goblets made from tinted automobile glass by people in Colombia and elegant journals and stationery made from - get this - elephant dung by women in Thailand.

Yes, elephant droppings are loaded with fiber, and this fiber is turned into beautiful paper - check it out.

Speaking of elephants, Abundant Earth offers tire swings made from reused truck tires that come in the shape of elephants, horses, reindeer, T. rexes, even motorcycles and fire-breathing dragons - a great way to reuse tires and get the kids outside. And speaking of kids, if you want to give them a head start in the post-carbon economy, lots of Web sites offer a variety of hydrogen-powered toy cars for kids, which run only on water. Today it's a toy, tomorrow, perhaps, the greenest invention of all, an adult hydrogen car.

Global warming has been on everyone's minds these days, and a huge meeting is occurring this week in Poland to renew interest in a global treaty capping emissions.

As the polar bear has emerged as the poster child for global warming and appears on book and magazine covers everywhere, you can adopt a polar bear (or killer whale, or panda, or tiger, or an elephant so it can continue pumping out poop for your stationery!) on behalf of your children from a variety of groups, including the World Wildlife Fund and the Defenders of Wildlife; from the latter group, you get plush toy versions of the adopted animals for your child and his room.

Erthnxt.org (not a typo, but a relatively new group connecting kids to the outdoors) offers a variety of tree-planting packages that are extraordinarily priced. Go to their

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Web site to see what's available, and plant away! Other groups allow you to adopt sections of rainforest and coral reef, two of the most important, vulnerable, and species-rich habitats.

Let's cycle back to the beginning and consider another green gift that benefits the local economy:

Give a membership or a contribution to one of the nonprofits that sustains the social, historic, cultural and environmental fabric of the Main Line. Harriton House, the Historical Society, the Main Line Arts Center, Riverbend, ElderNet, the Lower Merion Conservancy, and so many others have been hit hard by recent economic rumblings, and in some cases look to the community for their very survival. Including local nonprofits - who hire local people who purchase local products - in your gift giving is a great way to increase the greenness of your holiday.

Gift memberships, where your family can participate in events all year long, is a wonderfully green idea for the holiday.

So here are many green ways for you to consider conquering a blue Christmas. And don't forget: Tomorrow is First Friday. Think globally, shop locally!

Mike Weilbacher is executive director of the Lower Merion Conservancy and can be reached at mike@dragonfly.org. He'll be appearing at Narberth's First Friday tomorrow from 6 to 9 p.m. Hope to see you there.

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