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How to Have a Planet-Friendly Holiday Season

For many people, the holidays are a time filled with great joy. The tradition of exchanging gifts with friends and family provides a wonderfully tangible way to show our love, and the gathering of family members that hail from near and far creates precious memories of togetherness which are cherished for years to come. Whichever holiday you may celebrate, from the last few weeks of December through to the turn of the New Year, there is an undeniable and magical feeling of happiness and 'holiday spirit' in the air. Unfortunately, the joy of the holidays does not negate the sobering fact that the holiday season, as we know it today, causes immense environmental harm (Good, 2022).

The average amount of household waste increases by 25% during the holidays (Mccray, 2021). This is due to both the shopping bags and wrapping paper we use during the holidays, and to the increase of consumerism and mass-buying around this time itself. In Canada alone, nearly 550,000 tons of waste are produced each year from discarded wrapping paper and plastic shopping bags used during the holiday season (Bowden, 2019). Not only that, but the glitter on the decorations and gift paper we use during these short few weeks causes irreparable harm to ecosystems globally. In fact, glitter has been called a "stealth microplastic pollutant," in part because it has no regulation, unlike other common environmental hazards (Yurtsever, 2019).



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Glitter is often made of plastic, but is coated in metal, which renders it toxic to aquatic organisms and makes it non-biodegradable. It is unique in the sense that most other plastic pollution begins as a larger entity and slowly degrades into microplastic form; glitter, however, is already “micro” at its inception, making it capable of leaching into our environmental systems from virtually any point of entry. Bits of hexagonal glitter have been found in systems from sewers to riverbeds and

in locations ranging from Lake Ontario to Glasgow Scotland, and from Norway to the Tehran Metropolis in Iran, to name a few (Yurtsever, 2019).

Not only are these holiday-habits harmful to the environment, but many traditions as they are today could even be harmful to our own health. For instance, in the previous example discussing glitter, there are obviously a plethora of reasons why it harms our planet. But could it also be dangerous for us? Unfortunately, yes! In fact, as Today Glitter notes, glitter “has components considered toxic for our bodies ... (not just) the environment, like aluminum, titanium dioxide, and iron oxide.” Not only is glitter a toxic micro-pollutant, but it is theorized that glitter could also have negative effects on humans too. Putting aluminum, titanium dioxide, and iron oxide in our makeup and on our holiday decorations allows these chemicals to leach into our skin and to be inhaled, should give us pause when deciding to keep holiday traditions unaltered.

Glitter is not alone in being a potentially dangerous part of our holidays. Candles, which are used widely in both religious and festive contexts during the holidays, could also pose a threat to human health. Specifically, as reported by research done at South Carolina State University, candles made from paraffin wax can be hazardous to human health. Because paraffin wax is derived from petroleum, burning these types of candles



releases hazardous compounds, including benzene, toluene, and alkenes. Once again, in choosing to opt for more planet-friendly alternatives, like candles which are not derived from fossil fuels, these options are also safer for our own health too.

Solutions

All of this is not to say there are no solutions to the problem of a harmful holiday season, or that we must give up all our cherished and long-established holiday traditions. In fact, nearly every single holiday activity can be made more sustainable with a few easy alterations. Additionally, in making our holidays healthier for the planet, we can also improve our own health!

Glitter

Take glitter for example - as mentioned, it is one of the most harmful aspects of the holiday season, but it comes with a simple solution: avoid it! Avoid wrapping gifts in glitter-y wrapping paper, avoid buying any new glitter-covered holiday decor, and avoid using any glitter-filled makeup when dressing up for holiday parties. By doing this, you have already taken a huge stride towards a planet-friendly holiday season. (For folks that already own glittery decorations, rather than throwing them out and buying new ones and therefore contributing to more holiday waste, simply prevent the glitter from becoming a pollutant by taking care that it stays indoors and on your decor. To minimize the inhalation or accidental consumption of glitter, vacuum frequently and keep decor out of children's reach)



Gifts

Another major tradition that causes vast environmental harm during the holidays is the exchange of gifts. But it doesn't need to! There are so many lovely ways to show your loved ones that you care without purchasing a mass-produced item that is straight off of the holiday-consumerism conveyor belt. Here are just a few examples of heartfelt replacements for a generic store-bought gift:

- Gift of an experience (dance lessons, a nice date, a concert, a trip)
- Gift of a service (a favorite meal, fixing a long-broken appliance, cleaning a shared space)
- A handmade gift (painting, crochet/knitwear –very popular now, a framed personally taken photo)

Remember, the holidays are a time characterized by a surge of buying, so plan ahead and don't give in to the mass consumption traps of the season. Only 1% of all of the 'stuff' we buy and consume is still in use in 6 months' time! This means 99% is trashed within half a year (Leonard, 2007). However, if your gifts are planned in advance, then when you're standing in line at the store, you won't fall for the sneaky bait that is the little plastic gimmicks and 'quick and easy gifts' lining check out aisles for all of December.

Wrapping Paper

As previously mentioned, one of the reasons for the dramatic increase in household waste during the holiday season is attributed to discarded wrapping paper and plastic bags (nearly 550,000 tons of it, in Canada alone!) (Bowden, 2019). So, with



this in mind, choosing a planet-friendly option for wrapping your physical gifts can have one of the largest impacts. Many people think that recycling can be an easy answer to reduce landfill waste. But I try to remind myself, and I would urge you to remember as well, that there are two other 'Rs', which are more planet-friendly in general but especially when thinking of wrapping paper alternatives: reduce and reuse! These two both limit the amount that we buy and consume, so it's easy to see why in our consumerist society the big corporations want our focus on recycling instead. But if we can reduce the amount of new wrapping paper we buy, and then throw away, by either saving and reusing it for other gifts, or by reducing the amount we buy in the first place, that 550,000 tons annually will logically decrease. Here are some ideas for reducing wrapping paper during the holidays - and some related planet-friendly tips:

- "Wrap" your gift in a reusable container that can become a part of the gift (woven baskets, a tote bag, or even a backpack!)
- Wrap in fabric! If your children/friends/family like to have designs on the wrapping, this is a better alternative than classic paper wrapping. It's readily reusable for future gifts, or can even be made into something else, like a little tote/toiletry bag/pencil case to remember this year's holiday!
- If you would prefer a more classic gift wrap, choose brown paper wrapping paper, which can be more reliably recycled.
- And if you choose to have typical wrapping paper, seek out a glitter-free option!



Decorations and Religious Traditions

Finally, when planning for a more planet-friendly holiday season, there are always ways we can limit the impact of the holiday itself. Here is a short list of specific ideas to mitigate the detrimental impacts for a few holiday traditions and decor. It is by no means exhaustive, so take inspiration from these and apply them to other aspects of your holiday traditions!

General:

- Reuse holiday decorations each year and donate what you aren't using (in advance of the holiday so someone else can enjoy it!). In the future, only purchase reusable decorations.

Hanukkah:

- Use only eco-friendly Hanukkah candles, i.e., not petroleum based (these are better for our human health too!)
- Use a menorah that lasts a lifetime and can be passed on (it is even more meaningful to have a story of previous generations sharing the same one!). If you don't own one already, keep an eye out for second-hand, quality menorahs before Hanukkah begins. Ideally, these would be made from a durable material, like metal or glass.



Christmas:

- Research a Christmas tree renting/sharing program near you! Or, if one is not available, research where you can compost your tree, donate it, or ensure it can be picked up to be chipped.
- If possible, opt for an organic Christmas tree! Find helpful information on the choices for purchasing different types of Christmas trees, and their consequences, [here](#).

Altogether, this guide should be a rough outline to inspire your own decisions for how to best mitigate your environmental impact during the holidays. If you implement only one of these ideas, that's already an improvement! I urge you to consider these simple solutions, even if only a few, to create your own happier, healthier, and more environmentally friendly holiday season.

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