

Emphasis is on green this holiday season Families are more environmentally aware, and seek ways to conserve

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By Nancy Shohet West, Globe Correspondent | December 23, 2007

CARLISLE - Lauree Eckler's young daughters, Bella and Sophia, put stars on two items at the top of their Christmas wish list this year. They want a goat and a beehive.

Those requests aren't as unrealistic as they might sound. Although Eckler and her husband, Brad, have no plans to make room for any livestock in their Carlisle yard beyond the flock of chickens they are already raising, the family will use the money they have collected from returning plastic bottles to buy a goat and a beehive through Heifer International. The aid organization promises to make sure the goods reach a needy beneficiary in a developing country.

The Ecklers are part of a significant trend sweeping the country. Environmental awareness among average American households has reached an all-time high, perhaps due in part to Al Gore's Nobel Peace Prize for his work on global warming. And never have so many families been so avid in their pursuit of ways to make the holiday season more ecologically friendly.

According to a recent report in National Geographic magazine, during the course of the holiday season - Thanksgiving to New Year's Day - Americans throw away a million extra tons of garbage each week, including holiday wrapping and packaging. (The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection says statistics show that during the holiday season, Bay State residents, on average, produce 25 percent more trash compared with the rest of the year; also, the amount of energy used, on average, rises about 5 percent during the holiday season.) Add to that the fir trees thrown into landfills after the season ends, the dozens of greeting cards that many households send and receive, and even the fuel consumed to drive to the shopping mall, and it's easy to see why this season makes environmentalists throw up their hands in exasperation.

Ask most parents of young children what they think is the biggest problem of the season from an environmental perspective, though, and they will mention the onslaught of toys, many of which require batteries and hold their children's attention for only a few short months at best.

"One of the things that I'm particularly cognizant of at holiday time is the number of plastic and electronic toys out there and the speed at which kids outgrow them," said Mollie McPhee Ho of Carlisle, who has a 2-year-old daughter. "Every time a child outgrows a plastic toy, does it end up in a landfill somewhere leaching PVC or bisphenol A into the environment?"

Ho admits she does occasionally buy her daughter electronic or plastic toys, but goes to a local consignment shop for used models when possible.

Harry Bartlett, who runs the informational website ConcordConserves.org for Concord residents, said he has fielded a number of questions about environmental practices related to the holidays this year.

As father to three boys ages 6, 9, and 12, he understands the bind parents are in when their children ask for material goods that don't seem like particularly sensible purchases. Bartlett and his wife give alternative gifts, such as donations toward protecting endangered species in their sons' names.

For the adults in their lives, they often give gifts of carbon offsets, which are certificates representing the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions. And they encourage grandparents and other well-meaning relatives to give the boys things they can put to a specific use, such as winter jackets or ski gear.

For those who don't want to give up all their gift-giving, many families are finding their way to stores with "greener" missions.

"I did a good chunk of my holiday shopping this year at Dunia in Maynard," says Joanne Wu of Acton. "Everything they sell is either organic, made from recycled material, or processed using sustainable methods."

Indeed, many adults agree that observing better environmental practices does not have to mean changing holiday traditions dramatically.

Barney Arnold of Carlisle plans to light the tree with lower-energy light-emitting diode, or LED, lights this year, which according to the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection are 90 percent more efficient than incandescent lighting. A recent press release from the DEP states that "a household with 10 strands of lights plugged in for six hours a day for one month would spend about \$56.70 on large, incandescent bulbs, \$12.96 for traditional mini-lights, and just 65 cents for LEDs."

And as in past years, Arnold will wrap presents in newspaper.

Environmental writer Bill McKibben, author of "The End of Nature" and "Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future," has been thinking about issues related to environmentalism and the holidays for years. Long before it was a mainstream topic of discussion, he wrote a book called "Hundred Dollar Holiday: The Case for a More Joyful Christmas" in which he outlined some of the problems that holiday traditions exert on the environment.

Today, he sees the problem in a slightly different light.

"I'm less worried about green Christmases than happy ones," he said in an e-mail from his office at Middlebury College, where he is a scholar-in-residence this year.

"The research shows most Americans dread the approach of the holidays, because they are too crazy and too expensive - and because parents feel a little guilty about, in essence, baptizing over-consumption with the sacred pile of gifts 'round the tree. Doing something together as a family - maybe something outdoors, something you don't normally get to do - seems to me to be a lot more fun."

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