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Christmas a Nightmare for Recyclers

by Zack Gross

A scary holiday season image sticks in my mind. Down the block from my home is a recycling depot – about ten dumpsters in a row for people to toss in their newspapers, cardboard, glass, tins and so on. Normally, the amount that is dropped off is easily handled by a weekly pick-up by the recycling company.

At Christmas last year, the dumpsters were overflowing, to the extent that you couldn't see them anymore. At that point, we had a dump of snow large enough that our recycling area became, by Manitoba standards, a mountain covered in white. They had to bring in a front end loader to sort things out and, even after the recycling truck left with its load, the bins themselves were still full, and only the extra stuff was gone!

You can likely see where I'm going with this. In general, throughout the year, the wealthy portion of our world dumps unsustainable amounts of garbage on our environment. This, of course, needs to stop, as even recycling isn't keeping up with the onslaught. Ironically, during the holidays, when we celebrate the love of our families and friends, we actually intensify our garbage creation and, indeed the poisoning of those people we profess to love.

You've heard the complaints before. Our products have too much packaging. Many items, such as electronics, plastics and other synthetics don't break down and poison the environment if they do. For instance, on average, each and every Canadian citizen takes home about two plastic bags per week from the store – that's currently 55 million bags per week, says greenlearning.ca. Plastics account for seven percent of the total weight of a typical landfill. As well, each year, Canadians throw away (not recycle) six million tonnes of glass. A discarded glass bottle will take an estimate one million years to break down.

For the recycling enthusiasts, it's good to know that recycling one tonne of newspaper will save the lives of nineteen trees, conserve three cubic metres of landfill and avoid 30 kilograms of air pollution effluent. While aluminum cans, thrown out by the side of the road, will take 300 years to break down, using that can in a recycling program to manufacture new cans saves 95% of the energy needed in the process.

In recent years, with the advancements in electronics, the big sellers during the holiday shopping rush include plasma TVs, personal computers, DVD players. These and other similar items affect the North American population negatively, even if they also do give shorter term enjoyment. The world's consumers now own about 1.7 billion television sets, says WorldWatch magazine, with another 150 million added to the inventory each year. The average US household has 2 ½ TVs, five times the average in poorer countries. There are also 1.5 billion personal computers in the world today,

although now for every new one, an old one is thrown out. There are few environmental programs operating anywhere to deal with the rate of toxins being loosed as computers and other electronic items are discarded. Added to this, the increased energy use of large electronics contributes to global warming, power brown-outs and other problems.

Physical and psychological down-sides to computers, X-Boxes and televisions are chronicled by health promotion experts. Americans have increased the time they sit in front of the TV by 16% in the past twenty years. This increasingly sedentary lifestyle has led to an epidemic of health issues related to obesity. As well, the violent imagery in movies, TV shows and video games is documented as making children, youth and even adults more aggressive, while excessive TV watching is linked to attention deficit problems in students.

For those folks still planning to make that big electronic purchase, there are ways to limit the damage you cause. Look for “eco-labels” when you are shopping or check consumer web sites in order to find the most energy efficient and least toxin-laden options. One web site this writer checked, advocated Sony, Panasonic, Samsung and Sharp products as having made improvements by avoiding toxic materials.

For those wishing to go even greener for the holidays, wiretapmag.org offers 31 ideas on its web site for the socially-conscious giver. These include certified fair trade gifts, already touted in this column, such as coffees and handicrafts made by producers who receive a fair wage and work in safe and clean environments. Also mentioned on this web site are money clips made out of used computer circuit boards, vegan watches which have no leather products, the “Cycle and Recycle” calendar which promotes two leading ecologically-positive human activities, and gifts made of recycled items – school binders made of recycled plastic pop bottles, or glass bottles recycled and reworked as candle holders and vases.

To liberate your loved one from their electronic gadgets, give them a ski weekend, a trial membership at the local fitness club or a good book or board game. Tell them that, in return, they can give you a pledge to help you with the snow shoveling, the gardening or the family recycling that will get them outside and doing something. Thanks to recent snows, we are assured of a white holiday season, and now it’s up to us to make it green, as well!

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