

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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Thinking Already for Next Year's Christmas

At the end of the Christmas season, you sometimes give thought to all the pluses and minuses. These can be based on money spent and received, gifts presented and received, time spent with others and with your family, and the overall impact on the environment.

With respect to the environment, what kind of a Christmas tree should you have in your living room? For many years, we would buy a pine, spruce or fir that had been cut down sometime during the previous three months. It probably took about seven years to grow, and after it was cut down, it was used for about a month and then discarded. Hopefully, it was recycled as a biomass waste and converted to energy or compost. This seven to eight year process to produce a Christmas tree is not very sustainable for a one-month use.

But about five years ago, we went the other direction and bought an artificial tree which happened to be made in China. This tree, made of plastic, is also not very sustainable. Its primary feedstock is oil which is eventually converted to the plastic. After being manufactured, it is shipped about 7,000 miles to Chicago. Whether it is shipped by land and sea or by air, very unlikely, it contributes significantly to carbon emissions. The carbon footprint of an artificial tree is about ten times that of a natural tree. So you need to use the artificial tree for ten years to even out the carbon footprint of the two options. The question is whether the artificial tree is made to last that long.

It seems that there is a better alternative, something suggested to me by one of my students. In lieu of a final exam, my students are required to take a sustainability strategy that they learned in class and apply it to their place of work and tell me, and the rest of the class, how this strategy will improve the organization environmentally, socially and economically. If the student is not employed at the time, he or she can apply the strategy to any other company or, better yet, create a new company.

So this student happened to consider the same dilemma that I have been considering with respect to Christmas trees. He came up with a new paradigm by applying the servicizing strategy. A family doesn't really want to own the tree; they just want use the tree for a month or so. So why not lease one or rent one? The student's idea was to start a tree farm that grows pines, spruces and firs, and near the end of the year make them available for use. The tree would be removed from the earth along with its roots and have the base encased in a net-type bag. The tree would then be taken to, let's say, a home along with a special stand/container. At the end of the Christmas season, the tree would be returned to the farm where it would be replanted until next year. Some people like small trees about five feet tall while others can use trees as big as 12 feet. Consequently, a tree can be used over multiple years as it grows from five feet to 12 feet.

This system would provide many environmental benefits. The trees would not be cut down and discarded but rather would have a long life in sequestering carbon dioxide. There would be no shipments over great distances which otherwise would emit more carbon. No waste would be generated from a typically cut-down tree nor plastic waste from a synthetic plastic tree.

This system has some real merit and could be a new business. It would have to start small to prove its viability but could grow as more people become concerned with climate change. I am sure Greta Thunberg's family would lease one.