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Headline: Can the holiday season lead to global warming?

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The answer to this question is not as straightforward as one might expect it to be. There could be lower greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, which help slow down global warming, because the holiday season is a time when most people are not working. Scientists have been warning that rising GHGs in the atmosphere leads to heating of the atmosphere. By staying at home, there will be less GHG emissions because workers do not travel to the office and there is lower energy consumption as office buildings hibernate. Data from the Department of Energy confirm that there is less electricity consumption during the month of December. In 2016, the lowest energy demand for the year was registered on New Year's Day.

However, the flip side of the story is that people shift their GHG emissions to other activities during the holiday season. For example, people may use their vehicles to travel to the provinces, to visit relatives and go to tourist spots. Worse, multitudes of people will travel by air to reach their destinations. A Dec. 17 report said Naia is already experiencing a spike in passenger arrivals. I am not against air travel per se. In fact, I am writing this paragraph while at Naia Terminal 3, as I wait for my daughter and granddaughter to board their planes. But the reality is that the aviation industry has one of the highest carbon footprints.

The holiday season is also typically the time when consumption is at its peak. With year-end bonuses in wallets, the urge to buy is almost irresistible. This over-the-top consumerism leads to waste — lots of waste. Millions of tons of GHG are emitted to produce the goods and services sold during the holidays. To make matters worse, when waste is disposed in unsanitary landfills, it emits methane, a GHG far more potent than carbon dioxide. In the Philippines, landfills are the third largest source of emissions, according to the recently released Philippine Climate Change Assessment Report.

Fireworks displays during New Year's Eve are another source of GHGs. For instance, a study by Pangolin Associates found out that in Sydney, total GHG emissions during the 2012 New Year's Eve celebrations amounted to 626 CO_2-e, which is equivalent to the total emissions of more than 300 Filipinos in one year. Thankfully, there seems to be a concerted effort to reduce fireworks displays in the Philippines.

So what can we do to minimize our carbon footprint during the holiday season? Surprisingly, quite a number of things. First, we can start by being wise in what we buy. Let us avoid accumulating things that will remain unused for months and later on will be discarded. Second, let us plan our travels with fuel efficiency in mind. Third, let us be mindful of the amount of food we prepare and buy. Lastly, and in general, let us avoid overconsumption and wastage. Such actions will make our celebrations less costly, even as we help fight climate change.

Coincidentally, the holiday season is also the time when the international community under the United Nations meets to negotiate ways to address climate change. This year, the meeting just concluded in Katowice, Poland. While certain milestones were met, there is a pervasive sense that keeping the planet no warmer than 1.5 degrees remains a pipe dream.

As the planet hurtles toward uncharted territory, let us each do our share in minimizing our carbon footprint. A more sensible and mindful celebration is good for our health, our pockets and our planet.

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