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## Is a healthy economy good for people?

*By David Suzuki with contributions from Ian Hanington, David Suzuki Foundation editorial and communications specialist*

On November 25, referred to as "Black Friday" in the U.S., a woman pepper-sprayed fellow customers at a California Wal-Mart during a mad rush to get a bargain-priced Xbox. In North Carolina, it was police who used pepper spray to subdue shoppers hell-bent on getting deals on electronic gadgets during the biggest shopping day in the country.

Despite these and other incidents, including shootings, U.S. business leaders are buoyed by an expected rise in consumer spending — to nearly \$500 billion this year — in the shopping season, which begins the day after U.S. Thanksgiving.

Meanwhile, Adbusters, the Vancouver magazine that sparked the worldwide Occupy protests, is encouraging supporters to "Occupy Christmas" by boycotting holiday gift shopping, among other actions. (Adbusters also popularized Buy Nothing Day, which fell on Black Friday this year.) The prospect of a seasonal shopping boycott isn't making people in the retail industry jolly. Retail Council of Canada spokesperson Sally Ritchie said such protests would hurt businesses and working people when the global economy is in turmoil.

The argument is that without the seasonal scramble for gadgets and gizmos and disposable goods, businesses will fail and people will lose jobs. So, if you want to keep the economy strong, go out and buy as much stuff as you can, even if — or especially if — it will end up in the landfill!

Here are some other ways you can help keep the economy strong, according to John de Graaf and David K. Batker, authors of What's the Economy For, Anyway? You could have a car accident. That would mean money spent on repairs, insurance, investigations, and maybe even a new car. You could get a divorce. All that money spent on lawyers and court services is good for the economy. On a larger scale, you could hope for a massive oil spill. Cleanup costs contribute to a growing economy.

Forget about protecting a forest or conserving a wetland, though. Ducks and bears don't spend money. And services that nature provides, such as carbon storage, water filtration, and habitat for plants and animals, don't factor into most economic equations. That's because the measure most of the world uses to gauge the "health" of the economy is the Gross Domestic Product, the total value of goods and services a country produces in a year.

One month of crazy consumerism won't have a huge impact on the world's teetering economies. We need something bigger — a war perhaps. That would get money flowing. And we need to drill for more oil, dig up more minerals, convince people to throw out old stuff and buy new. We won't be any happier and we won't be healthier —

quite the opposite. But the economy will be stronger. And that's all that counts, right?

Sadly, for many political and business leaders, it is all that counts. But it shouldn't be. We need a new way of looking at what it means to live well within the Earth's natural systems. We need to consider what we truly need to be happy and healthy. It's not more stuff, and it's not working harder for longer hours at often tedious, pointless, or environmentally destructive jobs so that we can produce more stuff and get money to buy it.

Occupy Christmas is mostly symbolic. It won't change global economic systems, and it could hurt businesses and workers. But it might get us thinking about what really is important to us as we head into the holiday season. I'd argue that spending time with friends and family or helping out people in need are more important and satisfying than getting a new Xbox.

Not that gift-giving is bad. If it's sincere rather than just an obligation, it helps us connect with people. And meaningful gifts really do contribute to the betterment of the community — locally produced items or services, something you made yourself, donations to charities the recipient supports, invitations to partake in a shared activity.

The holiday season should be a time for resting, sharing, and celebrating, not for being stressed and overwhelmed at the mall. My wish for the season is that all of you are able to take the time to relax and reflect, and enjoy time with loved ones.

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