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For Caring Consumers, the Gift of Carbon Dioxide

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What says holiday cheer better than a ton of carbon dioxide?

Rebecca Young of Mountain View, Calif., recently opened her mail to find a gift from an old friend in New York City.

“[Carbon reduction certificate](#),” it read. It is good for three tons of carbon emissions that will be “retired” in her name so that no power plant will ever release them into the atmosphere.

To some people, the certificate may be as welcome as a lump of coal. But Ms. Young, a marketing manager for the environmental Web site [Care2.com](#), was delighted.

“I don’t need stuff,” said Ms. Young, 37, the mother of 3-year-old twins. “And as someone who cares about the environment, I thought it was a very kind gesture. It obviously showed that he knew me.”

Carbon reduction certificates are the latest hot eco-gift, suitable for the environmentally aware, hard-to-shop-for loved one who already has an adopted humpback whale or some symbolic [rainforest](#) acreage.

They are sold by the [Adirondack Council](#), a nonprofit group that watches over New York’s 9,300-square-mile [Adirondack Park](#) and sells \$25 certificates for carbon emissions that it obtained at carbon trading auctions.

The auctions are held four times a year by the only [cap-and-trade](#) program for carbon dioxide operating in the country, the [Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative](#). Popularly known as RGGI (pronounced Reggie), the program sets a ceiling on carbon dioxide emissions from power plants in New York and nine other Northeastern states to combat [global warming](#). (Carbon dioxide is the dominant heat-trapping gas linked to climate change.)

Under the state-regulated system, a utility must buy and hold permits, or “allowances” — one per ton of carbon dioxide — that are equal to its [monitored emissions](#). It can resell any

allowances it doesn't need when it lowers its emissions, or buy leftover ones from other companies if it exceeds its cap. The auctions where allowances are bought and sold are open to the public and require a minimum purchase of 1,000 allowances. The price fluctuates from about \$2 to \$3.50 apiece.

Last year, the Adirondack Council began bidding at the auctions and selling certificates for the allowances it retired from the market. Each certificate represents three allowances and sells for \$25 through the council's Web site at www.adirondackcouncil.org.

Unlike a so-called carbon offset, the group said, the carbon certificate is a reliable way to counter emissions.

In purchasing an offset, a person pays a fee to cancel out the emissions generated by, say, air travel. The money, in theory, goes to a program that reduces emissions elsewhere by using measures like tree planting. But there is often no way to verify whether a tree was planted, much less whether emissions were reduced.

When a consumer buys a carbon certificate, said John F. Sheehan, a spokesman for the Adirondacks Council, "you know you're preventing three tons of smokestack pollution."

Still, even some people buying the carbon certificates are not entirely sold on cap-and-trade programs as the best mechanism for curbing greenhouse gas emissions.

Dawn Rawls of Del Mar, Calif., who had just purchased some certificates as Christmas gifts for relatives, said the payment approach "doesn't emphasize enough that we have to work harder to reduce our carbon footprint."

This is the second year that the Adirondack Council has promoted the certificates for the holidays. It is believed to be the nation's only organization routinely "retiring" carbon allowances, albeit in small amounts — 10,000 one-ton allowances so far out of 170 million that have been traded at the RGGI auctions, which began in the fall of 2008.

The certificates are akin to the sulfur dioxide allowances that several nonprofit organizations around the country started buying in the 1990s from the [federal acid rain program](#).

Alan Chartock, president and chief executive of [WAMC Northeast Public Radio](#) in Albany, said his station offered 600 carbon certificates donated by the council for a minimum of \$100 per certificate during a fund drive earlier this year.

He said he was “astounded” by the response. “We were inundated with telephone calls,” he said. “Some people wanted one for each grandchild.”

Mr. Chartock said the certificates drew donations of up to \$1,000 each and were just as popular as conventional items like CD recordings of interviews with the singers James Taylor and [Pete Seeger](#). (The station received pledges for another 278 carbon dioxide certificates during a second fund-raiser in the summer.)

“The appeal is fear,” he said. “People are really concerned about what’s happening in the planet.”

But are givers concerned that the gift could be misinterpreted or even offend someone? That the environmental message relayed is not so much “Because you care,” as, “Here, to make up for your big fat carbon footprint”?

“If it helps any, I also sent her a box of maple candy from a small farm in the Adirondacks,” said Joseph Sanlei, who mailed the certificate to Ms. Young in California.

Mr. Sanlei, an anthropologist and auxiliary sergeant with the New York Police Department, said that carbon dioxide is a highly appropriate gift for Ms. Young, who attended Yale’s School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. “I’m sure she hopes that the children inherit a better world,” he said.

And as a bonus, he said, “I didn’t have to explain it.”

In Del Mar, Mrs. Rawls was filling stockings this week with eight carbon certificates she had bought.

She said her two grown daughters have grown accustomed to their parents’ environmental and philanthropic gifts. Over the years, she said, she has given them retired sulfur dioxide allowances, acres of threatened rainforest adopted on their behalf and, as the main present, donations to a cause or charity of their choice.

“They’re all self-sufficient now, so we figure that if they need something, they’ll buy it for themselves,” Mrs. Rawls said.

The apples do not fall far from the tree. Her daughters' gifts to her, which have already arrived, are a favorite fruitcake that will be eaten rather than disposed of and a wreath of living succulent flora that Mrs. Rawls planned to replant.