

I'm dreaming of A GREEN CHRISTMAS!

Penny Bunting and her husband Rich wanted to play a small part in creating awareness of climate change and our role in its causes, so what better than working alongside the North Pole's best-known resident

CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS IS a great excuse to get dressed up, and this month people will be shopping for that special new outfit for the office party or a family get-together. For my husband Rich, however, dressing up for Christmas took on a whole new meaning a few years ago.

In 2008 we set up an environmental project, Little Green Space, to encourage sustainable living and to promote the benefits of growing your own fruit and veg, as well as helping people to create havens for wildlife. The project includes our own eco-smallholding, but also takes a positive green message beyond our own patch and into the wider community, and our Save the North Pole campaign adds a festive element to this, as every year Rich dons a green Father Christmas suit and goes out and about to raise awareness of climate change and support environmentally-friendly projects and businesses.

Of course, the North Pole is important to all our children, who, in December, write wish lists and send them to Father Christmas, who just



happens to live at the North Pole. But with an increasingly warming planet the future of this entire special place is under threat, with potentially dire consequences for the wildlife, and ultimately for us all, if the predictions of many of the world's foremost scientists are to be believed. More Arctic ice is melting every year, with last year seeing the most dramatic melt since observations began in 1979.

The Arctic is one of Earth's last

major wildernesses and supports a huge number of animal species, many of which are to be found nowhere else. The polar bear is perhaps the most famous, but Arctic hares, Arctic foxes (pictured above left), tundra wolves and walruses also live there, and the prospect of ice-free summers at the North Pole could mean that some of these animals face extinction.

As the ice continues to melt, scientists predict we'll see more



Green Santa's debut outing.



Green Santa visiting All Saints Junior School in Matlock.



Touring the town in a horse-drawn carriage!



examples of extreme weather in the northern hemisphere. Droughts and flooding will become commonplace, and some scientists are linking the behaviour of the jet stream – responsible for much of our atrocious weather in 2012 – with the warming Arctic atmosphere.

GREEN SANTA

With the plight of the Arctic in mind, we decided it was time to give something back to Father Christmas by doing our bit to help stop the melt, and a green Father Christmas seemed an appropriate and ideal way to highlight the issues – indeed, before the twentieth century this festive figure was more commonly depicted wearing long green robes rather than the more familiar red outfit he wears today, which is apparently an invention of a Coca-Cola advertising campaign.

Getting hold of a green costume proved to be a challenge, though – red costumes are ten a penny, but even the most extensive search on eBay did not come up with a green one – so we asked a friend who designs theatre



Helping to plant sixty trees for the Tree O'Clock event.



Visiting Peak Ales.

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costumes to make us a green velvet suit. The result was perfect, and ready just in time for Green Santa's debut appearance – a tour of the town in an environmentally-friendly horse-drawn carriage! This first fund-raising event supported climate change projects in both Matlock and Ghana (through the work of Bakewell-based charity Village Aid), and also funded a grove of trees in Scotland's Caledonian Forest through award-winning conservation charity Trees for Life.

Trees were on Santa's agenda the following year too, when he helped to plant sixty native broadleaved trees on our Peak District smallholding – part of the nationwide BBC Breathing Places, Tree O'Clock event.

ECO AWARDS

For the past couple of years, Green Santa has joined forces with our local newspaper, the *Matlock Mercury*, to highlight the importance of supporting local environmentally-friendly businesses and organisations. The newspaper's 'Eco-Ho-Ho' awards

have become an annual recognition of the good work that local people are doing to protect the environment, help combat climate change and benefit the community.

One of the local businesses that Father Christmas was happy to visit was Peak Ales, an award-winning microbrewery on the Chatsworth Estate. At Garden Farm, an organic farm specialising in rare and traditional breeds of sheep, pigs and poultry, he also checked the progress of the Christmas turkeys. Cutting food miles by buying food from local businesses such as these is clearly a good way to reduce your carbon footprint and to boost the local economy. To put this simple step into practice you can find a list of farmers' markets and local food producers near you at www.bigbarn.co.uk.

One thing Santa really does enjoy is meeting children, and last December Green Santa visited members of the Gardening Club and Eco Council at All Saints Junior School in Matlock. In the school's award-winning garden, pupils grow fruit and vegetables, which are ▶



Checking the Christmas turkeys at Garden Farm.



Green Santa at the Northwood Recycling Centre.

► then used in the school's kitchen. One of the pupils dubbed their guest 'Eco Santa', which the old fellow found very amusing.

It's very rewarding to get out into the community to help spread a positive environmental message, but it does have its drawbacks. In the first year of the Save the North Pole campaign I reluctantly agreed to dress up as a polar bear. It took hours to get the white face paint off afterwards – never again! And now, whenever we visit our recycling centre, we get a real ribbing from the workers there. The Northwood Recycling Centre was a recipient of an eco award from Green Santa a couple of years ago, and we still recycle to shouts of, "Hey, look – it's Mr and Mrs Claus! What are you bringing us this year, Santa?"

Of course, nobody can single-handedly stop the ice caps from melting, and we know we are only playing a very small part in a much larger global challenge by raising awareness of the issues in our local area. But everybody can take small steps to reduce their impact on our precious planet, and in doing so, like us, they can have a whole lot of fun too! *



Further Info

Penny Bunting is a writer and smallholder living in the Peak District. She also runs the award-winning environmental project Little Green Space (www.littlegreenspace.org.uk).



Three Simple Steps to a Green Christmas

PRESENTS

Each year around 125,000 tonnes of plastic packaging is sent to landfill at Christmas. Avoid adding to the pile-up with some carefully selected gifts. Cinema tickets, magazine subscriptions or a day at a spa will all make welcome gifts and require no wrapping, and membership of the National Trust or English Heritage can provide a year's worth of family days out. Gifts from charity shops and catalogues will benefit those in need, as well as the gift's recipient. Or with a Trees for Life winter gift card ([visit www.treesforlife.org.uk](http://www.treesforlife.org.uk)) you can help restore a forest by having a tree planted for your nearest and dearest.

FOOD

A traditional Christmas dinner is made from seasonal British food, most of which can be bought from a local producer.



Farmers' markets are the perfect one-stop shop for festive food, and many areas have extra market days around Christmas. Local food makes a great gift too – why not put together a hamper of goodies as a special gift for a loved one? Choose organic produce, which has not been treated with chemical fertilisers and pesticides, the production and use of which adds to climate change. Try to avoid overbuying too – around a third of the food we buy at this time of year ends up in the bin. Careful meal planning and inventive use of leftovers can help to avoid this wastage, and don't forget to compost those sprout peelings!

DECORATIONS

Although it needs replacing each year, a real tree is more environmentally friendly than a plastic one. Fake trees last just six years on average, they cannot be recycled, and they take hundreds of years to break down in landfill. Buying a locally grown tree from a Forestry Stewardship Council accredited grower will ensure a completely renewable, carbon-neutral tree, which will already have the added benefit of having provided a habitat for wildlife during its lifetime. Then, at the end of the festive season your tree can be recycled – most councils have a tree collection service in place and will convert old trees into mulch for parks and gardens. Similarly, compostable decorations are better than plastic tinsel and baubles. Try chillies, popcorn, cinnamon sticks and gingerbread. Green foliage decorations such as holly, ivy and mistletoe can also be composted at the end of December, and by decking the halls in this way you'll be continuing a tradition that has gone on for hundreds (if not thousands) of years.

