

Vietnam store makes Christmas tree from cellphones

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In this Dec. 9, 2011 photo released by Westcom Electronics, a Christmas pine tree made of unusable cellphones is lit up in front of the electronic store in My Tho, Tien Giang province, Vietnam. The store is ringing in Christmas with the 15-foot tree made of more than 2,500 unusable cellphones. Store manager Nguyen Trai said 10 workers spent two weeks building the cellular Christmas tree. (AP Photo/Westcom Electronics)

(AP) -- Southeast Asia is closer to the equator than the North Pole, but an electronics store in Vietnam is ringing in the holidays with a 15-foot Christmas tree made from more than 2500 unusable cellular phones.

Nguyen Trai, a [store](#) manager at Westcom Electronics in the southern city of My Tho, says 10 workers spent two weeks building the cellular Christmas tree that he hopes will raise awareness about [hazardous waste](#) and promote environmental responsibility.

The glittering, cone-shaped creation has been on display for about two weeks outside the store in southern Tien Giang Province.

Between 700 and 800 people visit daily, Trai told the Associated Press.

"Many of them have taken pictures with the tree," he said.

Cellphones are ubiquitous in Vietnam, where more than 60 percent of the population is under 30 and hordes of young people flaunt flashy electronics to mark their rising wealth even as the country struggles to contain one of Asia's highest inflation rates.

Although the majority of communist Vietnam's 87 million people are Buddhist, there is a sizable Catholic minority and an enthusiastic general embrace of all things Christmas. The country's two largest cities - Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City - are studded with [holiday lights](#) all winter long, with bright-eyed teens promenading in Santa hats and yuletide-themed electronic music blaring in sidewalk cafes.

Westcom Electronics plans to auction its cellphone tree next year and donate the proceeds to charity, said store manager Nguyen Trai, adding that staff members are already collecting unusable phones in hopes of erecting an even bigger Christmas "pine tree" next year.

There are tens of millions of cellphones in circulation in Vietnam, but it's impossible to know how many used phones are dumped each year because the government doesn't collect such data, said Nguyen Thanh Yen of Vietnam's Environment Administration.

Yen said he welcomed the idea of raising awareness about hazardous waste, but Westcom Electronics has violated Vietnamese law, which requires businesses to seek official permission before using hazardous waste for new purposes.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme, people working in the informal sector collect the majority of "recyclable and reusable waste" in urban areas of Vietnam.

Solid waste management is among the "major environmental burdens" in developed and developing countries across Asia, especially in megacities, the U.N. says.

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