

# How to buy an ethical diamond

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Trina Hamilton, UB assistant professor of geography, is an expert in corporate responsibility.

(Phys.org)—You've already decided that you're going to pop the question. Now comes another quandary: Where to get the ring, if you're buying one?

The holidays are a busy time for engagements, and Trina Hamilton, a University at Buffalo expert in [corporate responsibility](#), says socially minded consumers have a lot to think about when it comes to finding the right rock.

In recent years, shoppers have turned to Canadian [diamonds](#) as [news reports](#) and movies exposed the diamond trade's role in fueling armed conflicts in developing countries. (Think "Blood Diamond," the 2006 thriller featuring Leonardo DiCaprio as a diamond smuggler in 1990s Sierra Leone.)

But Hamilton says choosing an ethical diamond is more complicated than avoiding [war zone](#) stones.

"Many people who are planning proposals choose Canadian diamonds because they don't want anything tarnishing the story of their engagement, but doing the least harm doesn't mean you're doing the most good," says Hamilton, an assistant professor of geography.

Ethical options for today's consumers extend beyond Canadian diamonds.

In a survey of 94 diamond retailers who promote themselves as ethical sellers, Hamilton and her students found that 13 were marketing ethical stones from countries other than Canada, including Botswana and Namibia. These two African nations have been recognized for using the diamond trade and associated revenues to create jobs and fight poverty.

Even in [Sierra Leone](#), there are efforts to develop "fair trade" diamonds, and some analysts suggest that diamond exports have helped to fund reconstruction since the country's civil war ended in 2002, Hamilton says.

"Consumers need to decide what they want their money to do," Hamilton says. "Starting in the late 1990s, Canada quickly cornered the ethical market. But now there's a bit of a [backlash](#): People have concluded that it's not addressing the issue of development of these [African countries](#) that suffered during the conflicts, and they're also starting to question

whether Canadian diamonds are as conflict-free as is often claimed."

If you're shopping for a diamond this holiday season, here are some tips from Hamilton:

**Look Beyond 'Conflict-Free':** Many retailers boast that they comply with the Kimberley Process, a certification scheme designed to prevent the trade of "conflict diamonds." But Hamilton says this is the bare minimum. Because the Kimberley Process defines "conflict" very narrowly, it doesn't address concerns like government-fueled human rights abuses; labor standards; or environmental impacts, she says. Shoppers should be aware that countries without Kimberly-designated conflicts are not necessarily free of other problems.

**Don't Settle For a Gift to Charity:** Twenty-one of the retailers Hamilton surveyed donate a percentage of profits to charity. This may be a commendable add-on, but in and of itself, "it's not addressing industry practices within the diamond trade," Hamilton says. Finding retailers who are also engaged in initiatives to improve social and environmental standards within the industry may be a more effective way to produce social change, she says.

**Remember That Activism Matters:** Consumer spending is an important way to influence business decisions, but people who are passionate about a cause shouldn't stop there, Hamilton says. Protests, and other forms of direct activism, are also a critical part of changing the industry and addressing broader issues of social and environmental justice, she says.

Hamilton emphasizes that there's no single answer as to what constitutes an ethical diamond. Consumers will arrive at different decisions about what to buy based on their specific social and environmental concerns, she says. She notes that even in Canada—where the diamond in Hamilton's engagement ring was sourced—mining of the stones has

caused some strife between companies and indigenous communities.

Besides diamonds sourced from countries of interest, Hamilton's survey of 94 sellers found that nine offered recycled diamonds, such as antiques, while six sold lab-created diamonds. The survey—part of an ongoing study—was based on retailer websites, with the researchers doing an in-depth analysis to identify product offerings, marketing strategies and discussion of ethical issues.

Hamilton's partners on the project include UB PhD candidate Seth Cavello and UB undergraduate student Christine Tjahjadi-Lopez. The work was supported by the UB Humanities Institute, Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy, and Canadian-American Studies Committee.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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