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Earth Action: Reconsider Electronics Replacement



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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These days, getting by without a cell phone – and probably a handful of other portable electronic devices – is very nearly impossible. Apps and programs keep getting bigger, too, constantly requiring more memory and faster data processing. That makes using a device that’s more than a couple of years old cumbersome. And let’s face it, there’s a serotonin hit involved in being able to say yes when someone asks, “Is that the new iPhone?” But electronics take a heavy environmental toll. So as Earth911 honors the 52 years of Earth Day with 52 weekly [Actions for the Earth](#), we’re taking a closer look at electronics. This week, you can [invest in the Earth](#) and make your life more sustainable by reconsidering when and how you replace your electronic devices.

Action: Reconsider Electronics Replacements CLOSE

Environmental Impact of Electronics

Cell phones, tablets, laptops, and other small electronic devices impact the environment in a lot of ways. They tend to incorporate a lot of different types of plastics. **Plastic** generates greenhouse gases throughout its lifecycle and is **rarely recyclable**, leading to **plastic pollution**. Inside those plastic cases, electronic devices are likely to include **red list chemicals** like cadmium and halogenated flame retardants. Many electronics **require rare earth minerals** (also called rare earth elements). Mining these elements releases **about 2,000 tons of toxic waste** for every ton of mineral produced. Nearly all of it is **produced in China** where environmental laws are lax and rarely enforced. Despite the rarity of these materials, very little is reclaimed through recycling, and current rare earth element **recycling processes** are themselves environmentally harmful. Even though recycling electronics isn't harmless and can be a hassle, the **impacts of electronics disposal** are worse. Landfilling, incinerating, or dumping electronics can lead to pollution of soil, air, ocean, and groundwater.

Reconsider

When it comes to electronics, we need to add a fourth R to reduce, reuse, recycle – reconsider. It's easy to get caught up in the cycle of trying new things and automatically upgrading with each new model. But once you know the full impact, you might decide you don't need to buy all the devices.

Are there tasks that only an additional device can accomplish, or can you get creative with the ones you already have? For the devices you do need, do you really need the latest version? Or would a data card give it enough power to last another year? Can you create a charging schedule that makes waning battery life more tolerable? Try to **extend the life** of your cell phone; adding even one year to your replacement cycle will cut down on **e-waste** over time.

Recycle

Like a movie villain, your cell phone might seem to die only to **revive** for one more act. Sometimes a new battery or a night in a bowl of dry rice is all the **repair** it takes. But eventually, all electronics will die. **Computers**, cell phones, **stealth electronics**, and even **chargers** and **cables** can all have different recycling rules, but it's **worth the effort** to track down a recycler.

When you do need to buy a device, consider buying a **refurbished laptop** or cell phone instead of a new one. And if your data needs are super high and you must have the latest model, look for **TCO Certified IT products** that use more sustainable materials.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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