



Jewelry that cares



Image courtesy of Brilliant Earth

A couple's guide to purchasing socially conscious jewelry for their big day

By Danielle Cadet | CTW FEATURES

Diamonds are widely considered to be the ultimate symbol of glamour, status and - in the case of the engagement ring - love.

"If a diamond symbolizes love, you want to go the extra step of making sure you do the right thing," says Robert Cosentino, co-founder and executive director of the Conflict-Free Diamond Council (www.conflictfreediamonds.org), a nonprofit group devoted to certifying conflict-free gems.

In many African countries, the diamond mining industry has fueled civil wars and caused major human loss and suffering. These gems, known as conflict or "blood" diamonds, are often produced under unjust practices such as child labor and refusal to provide safe working conditions and fair wages.

While the majority of available stones are conscious, few retailers can guarantee the origin of their gems, Cosentino says. "About 95 percent [of the industry] is conflict-free, but less than 1 percent is certified conflict-free because the supply lines are that blurred," he says.

The key to ensuring a diamond is completely conflict-free lies in an audit trail, of sorts, that tracks the stone from its mine home to the owner's hand. Cosentino says the council only supports brands and retailers that can assure consumers of the utmost manufacturing standards. "From when it comes out of the ground to when it is placed on the finger they need to know exactly where that diamond has been," he says.

Although several jewelry brands classify as certified conflict-free diamond manufacturers, it gets tougher to pinpoint retailers in which to find the few retailers can make the same promise. To find out where these brands are sold, Cosentino recommends consumers contact the individual companies. The council does, however, endorse Brilliant Earth, a San Francisco-based retailer that provides gems from one of the approved certification programs (the Canadian Diamond Code of Contact) both online and on location.

"It's up to consumers to demand an ethical product," says Beth Gerstein, the company's co-founder and co-CEO. Gerstein was motivated to start the company after personally searching for a conscious jewel to put on her own engagement ring. "The biggest thing a consumer can do is fight with [his/her] wallet. The most important thing is the industry needs to know consumers care," she says.

Contemporary brands are making sure customers don't have to sacrifice their principles to symbolize their love. Although finding a conscious ring may require some extra footwork, the decision can make a lasting global impact.

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PATH OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The story behind a conflict-free stone relies in its certification process

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Although conflict-free stones make up the majority of available products, it is difficult to track their origin without proper certification. Here's how couples can ensure they purchase conflict-free diamonds for their big day:

Border Issues

Once a gem crosses national borders, it can quickly lose its identity. Transportation and long supply chains can allow for conflict diamonds to sneak into the global market with legitimate stones, so it's important for the diamond to be mined, cut and polished

in the same region or territory without crossing any borders.

Engraved Identity

The diamond must be laser engraved with a serial number, then scanned and recorded in a confidential database. This process gives each stone an individual identity making it traceable from mine to manufacturer to consumer.

Strict Supervision

As it moves through the various production stages, the diamond must go through a rigorous monitoring system to ensure source and authenticity. The process helps to filter clean diamonds from conflict diamonds by conducting random factory inspections.

Play Fair

Diamonds may be conflict-free but can be easily tarnished if manufacturers practice unfair labor methods. Conscious jewels must be mined, cut and polished at facilities that adhere to global labor and fair wage laws and employ local residents. This helps guarantee that the profit generated by mines and manufacturers are reinvested into the local community.

Stamp of Approval

The stone must have a certificate from the regional government program certifying that all stages of production were corrupt-free and all prior standards were met.

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