

SUSTAINABILITY

## Emirates Airline centers conscious travel with dual initiatives

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*Emirates is taking a nuanced approach to environmentalism, grappling with the fact that human rights and sustainability are linked. Image credit: Emirates*

By EMILY IRIS DEGN

Dubai, U.A.E.-based airline **Emirates** is furthering environmentalism efforts by turning to justice-forward approaches.

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Exploring concepts such as circularity and intersectionality, Emirates is opting for lasting change rather than quick fixes or one-time initiatives. Changing the way the company operates sets it up for success in the age of the climate emergency, as other companies scramble to turn green.

### Circular justice

Emirates is adapting old-fashioned models to better suit the state of the world, embracing all-encompassing environmentalism.

In 2022, the company recycled over one million pounds of plastic and glass. The 1,102,311.31 pounds amounts to a similar weight of a fully-loaded Emirates flagship A380 aircraft, demonstrating just how much waste was avoided.



*Emirates has turned plastic into bags, blankets and other passenger items. Image credit: Emirates*

Emirates is able to recycle at this scale thanks to the proactive team members, as the crew separates all recyclables

onboard Dubai-based flights an initiative dreamed up by crew members during a company webinar that invited staff suggestions.

The crew separates the glass by color, and it gets sent off to be crushed and melted into new items. The plastic is cleaned properly, cut into smaller pieces, melted and sent to locations that reuse the plastic pellets for manufacturing new products.

Emirates also repurposes plastic within the company itself, creating blankets for Economy passengers and children's items. The newly introduced toys and bags for kids have saved eight million bottles, while the blankets have diverted 95 million bottles from landfills since they were first made in 2017.

Circularity is an extremely effective mode of environmental operations, as it sidesteps the idea of waste altogether. Using waste to create new things, and expanding the life cycle of material items, keeps them from polluting the land or ending up in landfills.

As landfills most often end up in communities of color, and Black Americans are 75 percent more likely than anyone else to live near the sites and other toxic facilities, circularity is inherently environmentally just.

Emirates' centering of this approach to environmentalism provides an intersectional model for green business practices, benefiting both the planet and those who rely on it.

### *Kelp Water Carrier Returns to Tasmania / Emirates*

This comes forward as well in the company's decision to transport a "rikawa" (a traditional kelp water carrier) of the Aboriginal people back to Tasmania from Paris.

"It is our distinct privilege to be involved in the process of reconnecting this piece of Tasmanian Aboriginal history from one corner of the world to another, with utmost care, and to ensure this invaluable kelp water carrier was reunited with its traditional owners," said Barry Brown, vice president of the Australasia division of Emirates, in a statement.

"We are committed to reuniting Australians from all over the world, whether that is with a place, people or with cultural objects that hold a strong meaning and significance to them."

According to Australia's [State of the Environment report](#) in 2021, while indigenous people represent only five percent of the world's population, they are directly responsible for protecting 80 percent of the planet's biodiversity. This provides further evidence that indigenous rights need to be incorporated into environmental action.

The Aboriginal item being returned by Emirates is designated as a significant Ancestral object of the Palawa indigenous group, made from bull kelp and held together with wood and fibers. It is one of only two known to still exist, having been stolen by French people 230 years ago and being mislabeled in French museums for centuries.



*The kelp water carrier is a critically important piece of Aboriginal culture and history. Image credit: Emirates*

"It is one of the most significant Aboriginal items in any museum collection and incredibly important for Palawa people to be able to see it on their country once again," said Dr. Gaye Sculthorpe, professor of cultural heritage and museum studies at Deakin University, Australia, in a statement.

"I congratulate all involved who have made this happen."

The rare "rikawa" is now housed in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and displayed in the "taypani milaythina-tu: Return to Country" exhibit. Emirates is sponsoring the two-year exhibit, as well as covering all costs

associated with returning the object.

Material of good

While Emirates is incorporating justice into environmental causes, the company is also turning to material sourcing.

Just recently, Emirates completed the first flight that was fueled by entirely sustainable fuel ([see story](#)). The feat was a huge milestone in aviation history.

The airline is also using raw materials for onboard items, such as rice paper, wheat, soy inks and paper from regulated forests. French luxury fashion house Louis Vuitton has also turned attention to supply chain materials, working in Australia to better understand sustainable sourcing ([see story](#)).



*Emirates' embrace of environmental justice shows through this sponsorship of the Aboriginal exhibit in Tasmania. Image credit: Emirates*

Green sourcing makes a huge environmental difference, especially as the world's resources increasingly dwindle. Emirates' attention to circular models, people-facing environmentalism and raw materials all signal a nuanced understanding of sustainability as a whole on the part of the company.

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