DON’T BE FOOLED
2012

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NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

This report is intended to cast light on the worst greenwashers. Starting with a broad sample, we examined cases of greenwash from the past several years, screening them for bold claims, egregious exaggeration, truly un-environmental behavior, and brands people are familiar with.

We did not attempt to list all of the worst environmental offenders, but rather the ones whose rhetoric was most distinct from reality. As a result, companies that didn’t bother to pretend to be green are not included. Conversely, we’ve included some companies that are not necessarily the worst in their field, but whose rhetoric didn’t accurately reflect their environmental performance.

For the top eight picks, we asked our members to vote in an online bracket, picking the most egregious examples. This is not a scientific sample, nor a representative democracy. But it gives us a sense of which greenwashers are most extreme, and we honor that input.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Greenwash fools consumers into supporting companies that are not truly eco-friendly, and it undermines companies that are doing good.

The Ten Worst Greenwashers are:

1. America’s Natural Gas Alliance (ANGA)

America is in the midst of a drilling boom, with more than a million natural gas wells being drilled across Pennsylvania, Ohio, and other states. And the drilling companies would love you to think the process is healthy, happy, and green. And if you watch their TV ads, which are blanketing those parts of the country, you’d see just that.

But “natural” doesn’t mean green. In reality, the destructive new drilling technique – called “fracking” – involves a range of environmental risks and problems. It’s caused drinking water contamination, pollutes millions of gallons of water per well, releases air pollutants, and in Ohio has actually caused earthquakes.

2. Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP)

Producing oil from Canadian tar sands – or, as they prefer to say, “oil sands” – is a dirty process. It devastates vast areas of land, uses massive amounts of energy, pollutes huge quantities of water, and produces a carbon footprint 20% higher than traditional oil.

But the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers ran a set of ads last fall, in print and on TV, touting the ecological restoration, and comparing their product to both peanut butter and yogurt. Even if you’re hungry, it’s hard to swallow the claims about restoration, and it misleads the public about the overall project.

3. Walmart

In the past three years, Walmart has embarked on a bold strategy for sustainability – or so their PR department would have you believe. From solar panels in parking lots to organic produce on (some) shelves, Walmart is touting their green initiatives. But it’s more of a public relations move than a deep change.

And Walmart is as unsustainable as ever. Their products push our entire culture toward cheap, throwaway production. Their stores undermine other businesses and increase driving and oil dependence. Worse still, Walmart spends big money on anti-environment political causes.

4. Fiji Water

Ads for the “Fiji” brand of bottled water tout the unsurpassed pristine, green, and clean qualities of their water. They’ve alternately claimed both that “every drop is green” and that their water, far from having a high carbon footprint, is actually “carbon negative.”

Both claims resulted in lawsuits – but the bigger picture is that bottled water is an inherently unsustainable product, no matter how you dress it up.

5. CBS EcoAd

Recently, you might’ve seen a TV ad – maybe for a big SUV or a utility company – featuring a superimposed leafy logo. You might assume that the company or SUV was somehow green,
or doing good for the planet. But you’d be wrong.

Last year, CBS rolled out the EcoAd program. It allows any advertiser to pay extra, and some amount of that funding goes to eco-friendly projects. But EcoMedia “does not in any way certify, endorse or make any representations about EcoAd advertisers, their products or services” — which is to say, despite the leafy green logo, that product still isn’t green.

6. Malaysian Palm Oil Council

In Malaysia, demand for oil produced from palm tree plantations is driving rapid deforestation in some of the most important rainforest habitats for orangutans and other wildlife. But the Malaysian Palm Oil Council — a lobby group for some of the biggest producers — ran a set of ads describing their product as “sustainable.” Over and over, watchdogs have found this to be utterly false.

7. The Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI)

The Sustainable Forestry initiative sounds like a smart answer to the sticky issue of logging. If we can sustainably manage our forests, then everyone’s happy, right?

Not so fast. SFI is funded and directed in large part by big players in the American logging industry, and it mostly serves their interests. Worse still, SFI funds lobbying and advocacy that undermine other, truly sustainable, labeling standards, like LEED certification for buildings, and FSC, the Forest Stewardship Council, which is a trustworthy label for paper and wood products.

8. Mazda

For decades, Dr. Seuss’s “The Lorax” has been a beloved beacon of environmental values, telling the cautionary tale of The Once-ler, who cuts down all the Truffula trees, leaving the valley a barren waste of “smogulous smoke.”

But the Hollywood reinvention of The Lorax has more than 70 product tie-ins, including Mazda’s CX-5 SUV. And their ads — even if touting a somewhat fuel-efficient SUV — take the cake: full of flowery images, surrounded by happy animals, the SUV wins the “Truffula Tree-Certified” award.

9. BUSTED: Windex

Windex recently started selling with a label declaring its ingredients to be “Greenlist” certified. But “Greenlist” was just an internal program, not any real certification. Windex hadn’t passed any third-party standards — but it sure looked like it.

Under new regulations, Windex was sued for misleading consumers. And they agreed to make the label less confusing.

10. BUSTED: Tested Green

In 2009, one man created a green certification label which he called “Tested Green.” For a fee, companies could pay to use the logo on their products. One snag? There was no testing, and the only “green” involved was money. In 2010, the FTC shuttered the whole operation for willfully defrauding the public.
INTRODUCTION

Companies have gotten a lot sneakier since the early days of greenwashing. Today, it’s rare to see bald-faced lies and deception, as when an oil company rebranded itself as “Beyond Petroleum,” or when a paper company touted that it was actually helping trees, not hurting them. In 2012, we still see a few such blatant examples – greenwashing, plain and simple. But increasingly, advertisers are finding more creative ways to hide a not-so-green reality behind a green façade.

Today, we’re seeing several new ways that advertisers are trying to trick us. Weak and dubious certifications are rising in popularity – see below for SFI, EcoAd, and Trusted Green. But even sneakier, many companies are presenting leafy green ads that don’t actually make any claims about their products. Greenwashing ads have stopped making factual arguments – well, maybe they never were – and have entered the emotional realm. Today, greenwashing has a new arsenal: the trusted person who discusses hard work, the “straight talk” about shared values superimposed over a beautiful landscape, and the distract-and-conquer approach, where spokesmen cite irrelevant statistics that make them sound trustworthy. All have one thing in common: they’re using a sneaky public relations strategy to mislead you.

Whatever it looks like today, greenwashing is still bad for shoppers and the general public. If companies get more bang for their buck through advertising than through genuinely green initiatives, and if they can keep fooling consumers, we’ll never be able to build the movement for green products, services, and businesses. If people are mistrustful of green claims, fewer people will take any environmentalists seriously. And if bad companies can get away with their hijinks, good companies won’t be rewarded.

But, as ever, the truth is on our side. And we hope, with your help, that this report can help bring the truth out, hold the greenwashers accountable, and drive a more sustainable economy in our future. So please read on for the top 10 greenwashers, as voted by our members.
1. America’s Natural Gas Alliance (ANGA)

PROFILE

ANGA is a trade organization that represents 30 American natural gas drilling and refining companies. The natural gas industry is in the midst of a boom, powered by a huge expansion thanks to a new technology called “fracking.” This process enables drillers to access reservoirs of natural gas throughout shale formations of bedrock, using millions of gallons of pressurized liquid, a mix of water, sand, and chemicals. More than a million wells are said to be drilled across America, mostly in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Colorado, and – soon, possibly – New York. (Goodell 2012)

ANGA spends tens of millions of dollars each year on advertising, based on data from the first half of 2011. (Miranda 2012) In addition, it lobbies for more rapid development, often at the expense of environmental and health safeguards. And according to watchdog group estimates, it spends millions of dollars on such lobbying each year. (Center for Responsive Politics n.d.)

RHETORIC

First, let’s look at the national ad campaign. In one video, a narrator talks about the need for a dependable energy supply, while panning past images of pristine natural places and drilling technicians at work. Their technological advances, the ad claims, mean that their drilling is now protecting land, water, and air from pollution. A child runs across a field with a kite; a breathtakingly beautiful valley appears.

In areas where drilling is ongoing or under consideration, advertising is occasionally much more intensive, with individual fracking companies running ads touting jobs and safety, and even some residents paying for a billboard to tell their story of contaminated water. ANGA’s billboard ads in fracking communities have generally been about safety. (Phillips 2011)

REALITY

In truth, the natural gas drilling industry is harming land, air, and water, and ANGA itself is engaged in massive lobbying and advocacy AGAINST common-sense environmental protections.

To start, let’s examine the environmental impacts of the drilling process. Because of the chemicals involved, and the massive amount of water that is discharged after each well is drilled, there are definite risks to human health through water contamination. There are multiple reports of gas from the drilling process
process seeping into water supplies, which is unhealthy if left alone, and prone to explosion if opened to flame. (Levi 2011) Add some initial findings that fracking has been responsible for earthquakes – and, well, it’s fairly clear that “protecting land, air, and water” is a stretch of the truth.

In an article calling on industry to expand, economist Michael Levi wrote that the gas drilling “industry has failed to recognize the significance of the hostility it faces,” and it would therefore be wise to push for higher safety standards. (Levi 2011) Critics are far less guarded. Take Sandra Steingraber, a biologist and writer, who says, “Fracking is inherently unsafe. It involves blowing up the bedrock under our feet, a landscape that nobody’s seen, pumping it full of inherently toxic chemicals and essentially opening up portals of contamination between the surface and these deep geological strata.” (Robertson 2012)

All told, the natural gas drilling ANGA is pushing is not as safe or eco-friendly as it would have you believe. And that means that their ads and PR are greenwashing.

SNEAKY

This is some savvy marketing. In its TV ads, the narration starts with broad, apparently self-evident statements about how much we need energy, and how energy helps us to have high quality of life. This accomplishes two goals: it gets the audience to trust the narrator, and it gets us thinking about how glad we are to have heat in the winter, or air conditioners in the summer. But the statements that follow are usually more dubious: claims about how this drilling is protecting our land.

Case Study: Chesapeake Energy

Chesapeake, the second-largest natural gas company in America and a member of ANGA, gets an honorable mention because of a public relations campaign it ran. Recognizing that natural gas could expand drastically, Aubrey McClendon of Chesapeake championed a strategy to vilify coal. He masterminded and bankrolled a billboard campaign called “Coal is Filthy”, and then secretly donated $26 million to the massively effective Sierra Club campaign to shut coal power plants. (Goodell 2012)

Now, that’s something where we may have common ground. For those of us concerned about climate change, coal is one of the worst sources of energy out there. But Chesapeake is looking to make natural gas the energy supply of the future, and that generally means clean, renewable fuel wouldn’t occupy that role. And while it may be strategic for environmentalists to ally with natural gas on a short term effort to defeat coal, in the long run natural gas is not the right solution.
2. Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP)

PROFILE

An industry association for Canada’s rapidly growing oil industry, CAPP represents companies that produce 90% of the country’s oil and natural gas. Growth in Canada’s tar sands, which have been called the “Saudi Arabia to the North,” have propelled the country to be the largest source of oil for the United States, and the fifth-largest energy producer on the planet. CAPP is a major booster of this source of oil, its export and pipelines, and altogether is the voice for a $100 billion annual industry. (Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers n.d.)

RHETORIC

In fall 2010, responding to a rapidly worsening public image, CAPP launched a print and television ad campaign designed to put a human face on the tar sands industry. The campaign includes more than 10 print/billboard spots and video segments, at 30 seconds each. CAPP is not disclosing costs, but coverage in Canada especially is blanketing the country and ongoing at time of writing in spring 2012. (Austen, Study Disputes Oil Sands ‘Restoration’ Pledge 2012)

The ads generally feature one person who works in the industry, telling his or her story as it relates to one element of the tar sands production process. According to one Canadian commenter, “CAPP’s use of regular folks is aimed at breaking down the barriers between Big Oil and average Canadians.” (Libin 2010) Each is told as a first-person narrative, and finishes with a close-up shot of the person signing his or her name. Many such ads have run, highlighting various aspects of the tar sands oil industry, but a few are worth discussing in particular.

One TV ad, first airing in October 2010, features Shelley Powell, the Vice President of Extraction for Suncor Energy, one of the largest oil companies in Canada. The original voice-over included the following: “Tailings results when we extract the bitumen from the oil sands. It’s essentially like yogurt and if left on its own would take decades to settle.” The video can be seen here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRTBH9ygFBo].

After the Canadian Sierra Club filed a complaint with Advertising Standards Canada, the board ruled that the “yogurt” reference was not misleading, but CAPP removed the yogurt reference. (Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers 2010)

Another ad shows Steve Gaudet, the Manager of Environment at Syncrude, showing off a restored landscape which had once been an open pit mine. He talks about how hard Syncrude is working to restore the land with several kinds of trees and shrubs, and interrupts to say he sees two squirrels chasing each other. “We want to leave restored land that makes everyone proud,” he says. (Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers n.d.)

A third ad shows Eddie Lui, Vice President for Oilsands Development and Research at Imperial Oil. He relaxes, arms folded, in front of what is evidently advanced oil refining equipment. “Heavy oil is like peanut butter,” he says. “We have to make it thinner so it can...
flow.” (Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers n.d.)

In addition to the print and video ads, CAPP sponsored a cross-Canadian tour, with several American stops too, in 2010: the “National Oil Sands Dialogues.” The campaign resulted from a high-cost revamped messaging strategy, under the guidance of Peter Sandman, who specializes in communicating risky industries. (Tait 2010)

REALITY

Canada’s tar sands expansion is one of the biggest, fastest-growing, and least understood environmental issues of the last two decades. A quick primer: tar sands oil is produced from bitumen, a tar-like substance that is a mix of sand, clay, water, and oil. To produce it, companies strip-mine the bitumen, heat it, and then upgrade the oil into “synthetic crude.” (Pembina Institute n.d.) And this massive expansion in oil production means that the industry CAPP represents isn’t green at all. Their ads that compare it to peanut butter and yogurt, or highlight the land restoration, are nothing but greenwashing.

Let’s take a closer look at the true environmental impacts. In addition to reshaping Canada’s whole economy, the tar sands operation generates environmental impacts that generally fall into two categories: impacts on global warming, and impacts on land, water, and habitat.

First, tar sands have a big impact on climate change. Climate change is caused by increasing levels of carbon dioxide (CO2) and, to a lesser extent, other gases, in the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide is formed when a carbon-based fuel is burned, like coal, gas, or oil. So when we talk about the development of the Canadian tar sands, it’s important to remember that they are one of the largest reservoirs of carbon left

“Tailings results when we extract the bitumen from the oil sands. It’s essentially like yogurt and if left on its own would take decades to settle.”
untapped on the planet – the second-largest reserve of oil, according to the industry. As a society, we often have no good way to ask questions like "should all that carbon pollution be burned and released, or left in the ground?" But, assuming that humanity would like to exist on a similar Earth as the one we've had for the last few thousand years, the answer is unequivocally that it should be left where it is.

Beyond that, it gets more complicated. The process of producing oil from tar sands is energy-intensive, usually powered by piped-in natural gas. Compared with drilling for so-called "easy oil" – the stuff near the surface that pops up in geysers – this process uses 3 to 4 times more energy. The result is oil that has contributed to global warming both when burned, AND during the production process. It causes significantly more pollution than regular oil, which hardly ought to be the baseline anyway. (Pembina Institute n.d.)

In order to mine bitumen, producers generally have to wipe out entire landscapes, dig giant pits, use immense amounts of water, and are left with a desolate landscape to try to rehabilitate. The industry is undertaking a somewhat serious attempt to learn how to restore land more effectively, but less than one percent of land disrupted for mining has been certified restored so far. (Pembina Institute n.d.) Moreover, the extraction process requires lots of fresh water – between two to four barrels per barrel of bitumen – and that ends up discarded and often stored in toxic ponds. The tailings, the chemical residue from oil production, are more toxic still. In one particularly telling example, just after these ads first started airing, Steve Gaudet's company Syncrude was fined millions of dollars after 1,600 ducks were killed from landing in a tailings pond. (Austen, Like Yogurt, but Not as Tasty 2010)

All of these together mean that the land is hardly restorable, and any attempt to paint the process as simple or sustainable are disingenuous. In a study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, researchers wrote,

"Claims by industry that they will 'return the land we use — including reclaiming tailings ponds — to a sustainable landscape that is equal to or better than how we found it' and that it 'will be replanted with the same trees and plants and formed into habitat for the same species' are clearly greenwashing.” (Austen, Study Disputes Oil Sands 'Restoration' Pledge 2012)

SNEAKY

This campaign is savvy: CAPP knew that many Canadians were being impacted by the oil boom, but didn't know much about the process, and it all seemed amorphous. So individuals working in the industry tell their stories. The effect is that the viewer doesn’t learn about oil; rather, when watching, we feel as though we've made a friend in the industry, and it's someone we trust. In Steve Gaudet's ad, he doesn’t bother explaining the process of restoration; he talks genuinely about how he's working hard and hopes people appreciate that effort. Shelley Powell doesn’t talk about science; she talks about yogurt. It works because the viewer connects with the character, rather than worrying about the company or the process. But there is hope that the truth will out. Marc Chikinda, dean of communication studies at Mount Royal University in Calgary, notes that this type of ad strategy is compelling but won't necessarily
succeed: “Young people are tremendously sophisticated consumers of social media, and they will know when someone is trying to manipulate their opinions.” (Tait 2010) Let’s hope that they’ll share that insight, and more people can see through CAPP’s greenwash.
3. Walmart

PROFILE

Walmart is the largest retailer in the world, the largest private employer in the world, and has the most revenue of any company in the world. Every week, its 10,000 stores serve more than 200 million shoppers. (Walmart, Inc. n.d.) When it embarks on any new strategy, it makes news. And that’s why it’s so important to understand how Walmart is claiming to be green.

RHETORIC

Walmart has pursued a strategy of sustainability, though the big question is whether it is anything more than a PR strategy. Ultimately it is a strategy that Walmart hopes will to shift the discussion away from labor and local-business impacts, and towards the small droplets of good that Walmart is doing – all the while allowing its untrammeled expansion. Its pursuit of sustainability is mostly visible through the media and the direct shopping experience.

Walmart’s efforts toward sustainability pop up occasionally in national, broad-market media. It starts with coverage in everyman publications like USA Today, with articles like “Is Wal-Mart the new green giant?” and “Wal-Mart plans new solar power initiative,” both from 2010. Coverage in the New York Times is also abundant, with pieces like 2011’s “Behind the Greening of Wal-Mart.”

But even more interesting is the way they’ve leveraged their name into niche publications. Obviously, in any area, like marketing, procurement, and green consulting, Walmart is seen as the giant. So any steps that Walmart take are covered throughout niche media, and especially in corporate and sustainability publications. Our calculations show that GreenBiz.com, a popular niche media organization, mentions Walmart about 15 times a month, and Grist, a general environmental blog, mentions it about 8 times each month. In January 2012, Walmart’s team started a thoughtful and prolific green blog.

The result? Thought leaders, aspiring job-seekers, and the environmental community at large are inundated with information casting Walmart in a positive light. For the corporation, this is the publicity that no ad campaign could buy: it’s positive buzz among the most skeptical of people.

REALITY

Despite all the noise Walmart has generated, the truth is that these are small changes, completely outmatched by three other ways Walmart is harming the environment. [Note: this section draws from (Mitchell 2012)]

But before we continue, a disclaimer. At The Green Life, we DO applaud every effort to go green. And we know that lots of small steps make a long journey. Furthermore, when retail giant Walmart takes even tiny steps, it covers some notable ground because of its huge size.

But while these steps are good signs, they are not being matched by far more meaningful actions that Walmart ought to do. And when Walmart gains positive news coverage, builds buzz, or grows its reputation for doing good through these acts, it’s greenwashing. Here’s why:

First, Walmart has made choices in its business model that tie American towns and cities to a car-dependent, sprawling mode of living. Their
pattern of business seems to be to develop a highway-accessible, undeveloped tract of land some distance outside a town or city center. Often, this accelerates the trend against smaller, pedestrian-friendly businesses. With stores and parking lots now covering about 60,000 acres in the United States, this sprawl is likely:

“their most serious legacy for the environment,” according to Kaid Benfield, director of the Sustainable Communities and Smart Growth program at the Natural Resources Defense Council.” (Mitchell 2012)

It is not fair to attribute this demographic trend entirely to Walmart. But contributing to sprawl certainly diminishes the legitimacy of their other efforts to help the environment.

Second, Walmart is driving forward the trend for shoddier, cheaper products. Over time, this accelerates the “factory to landfill” flow of goods, and ultimately means we’ll end up with more waste. Stacy Mitchell elaborates:

“Today Walmart says it wants to reduce the amount of pollution involved in making some of the stuff it sells. That seems like a good thing – except that everything else Walmart does is designed to undermine the durability of consumer goods, accelerate the flow of products from factory to landfill, and get us to buy more stuff.” (Mitchell 2012)

The same strengths that have led to Walmart’s retail domination – its ability to force suppliers to compete with ever cheaper and cheaper products – are undermining the quality of the things it sells. Again, Walmart is not the only player in this market, but it is surely the best able to drive a change in the whole marketplace. And it is failing to do that.

Last, Walmart is harming the planet by leveraging its political weight, donating to candidates who vote against environmental protections. Though sustainability publications have applauded Walmart’s small steps, like a weak endorsement of a climate-change bill in 2006, this has been far outweighed by its less-visible political donations. Over the last ten years, Walmart has given nearly $9 million to races at the federal level – which positions it near the top among corporations. According to analysis of the Walmart PAC’s donations, the company’s political giving skews along environmental lines – giving more to anyone who votes against protecting clean air, clean water, and open space. (Mitchell 2012) And in today’s political landscape, when money is paramount in politics, representatives hear Walmart’s message loud and clear.

To close, it is worth reiterating that Walmart has taken tentative steps in the right direction, and we rightly applaud those. But until they can be more substantive, and until Walmart can correct these other issues, their strategy to go green seems like more of a public-relations strategy – a greenwashing strategy – than anything else.
4. Fiji Water

Ads for the “Fiji” brand of bottled water tout the unsurpassed pristine, green, and clean qualities of their water. They’ve alternately claimed both that “every drop is green” and that their water, far from having a high carbon footprint, is actually “carbon negative.”

Both claims resulted in lawsuits – but the bigger picture is that bottled water is an inherently unsustainable product, no matter how you dress it up.

PROFILE

Fiji Water has created a high-profile niche, selling bottled water imported from the island paradise of Fiji. Today, it has emerged as a celebrity favorite, with drinkers like Bruce Springsteen and Lindsay Lohan. And it’s an industry leader in the still-growing bottled water market.

RHETORIC

Fiji has long been accused of greenwashing, but in 2010 and 2011 it ran two advertising campaigns that are worth highlighting. Both have been the subject of class-action lawsuits. First, Fiji used a marketing slogan that “Every Drop is Green.” Second, Fiji claimed that its whole operation actually had a net-beneficial impact on global warming, saying that its water is “carbon negative,” a term that isn’t obviously defined. Fiji explained that it was offsetting 120% of its carbon footprint – taking more carbon emissions out of the air than its operations were adding to it – and doing so by planting trees. (Quraishi 2011)

Beyond these ad campaigns, Fiji makes a number of deceptive claims on its website, including that their packaging is “sourced locally” from local vendors near their production plant, even though the product is then shipped thousands of miles. They also highlight the relative efficiency of their plastic packaging (compared with glass) and of shipping via ocean freight (rather than by airplane). We left the website a little suspicious, to say the least. (Fiji Water n.d.)

REALITY

Fiji Water has two major green problems: its carbon footprint, and the resulting plastic waste. Both are united around one central issue: bottling and shipping water over long distances cannot be green, by its very nature. Heidi Siegelbaum writes,

“Fiji is using staggering amounts of energy, water, and fossil fuels to take a naturally occurring product (which is not regulated like drinking water here in the US), put it in an inherently problematic container and then have that forever-container tossed into landfills or incinerators all over America (and Asia, where we have a healthy export market for plastics).” (Siegelbam 2008)

Let’s dig into the carbon footprint. The main impacts of Fiji’s operation are from producing its containers and shipping them across the
world. One back-of-the-envelope calculation found that Fiji would need to replant something on the order of 200,000 acres of rainforest in order to offset this impact – using Fiji’s own disclosed numbers. But their proposed plan to offset these emissions will take decades to go into effect. (Quraishi 2011) And after a class-action lawsuit was filed in late 2010, Fiji withdrew the carbon negative claim.

But the other question remains: can every drop be green? The resulting plastic pollution means a resounding no. Fiji bottles are made of PET plastic, which is generally made from natural gas, a fossil fuel. And while recycling rates for plastic bottles are up somewhat, still only about thirty percent of plastic bottles in the country are recycled. And worse still, recycled PET is primarily made into lower-grade products, not remade into bottles. (Environmental Protection Agency 2012) Calling this product “green” is a stretch and does disservice to truly green products.
5. CBS EcoAds

Recently, you might’ve seen a TV ad – maybe for a big SUV or a utility company – featuring a superimposed leafy logo. One could assume that the company or SUV was somehow green, or doing good for the planet. But that would be wrong.

Last year, CBS rolled out the EcoAd program. It allows any advertiser to pay an extra fee, and directs some amount of that funding goes to eco-friendly projects. But EcoMedia “does not certify, endorse or make any representations about EcoAd advertisers, their products or services” – which is to say, despite the leafy green logo, that product still isn’t green. (How EcoAd Works n.d.)

The heart of the problem with this scheme is that consumers are accustomed to seeing green labels and certifications to help them figure out which products are truly green. And EcoAd looks just like such a label. Thus far, many companies with varying environmental records have used the program, including Pacific Gas and Electric, Chevrolet, SunPower, Arrowhead, Energy Star, Taco Bell, Jetblue and Interface. (Bardelline 2011)

That led several watchdog groups to file an official complaint with the Federal Trade Commission, which regulates advertising content. “If CBS fails to provide a clear explanation on each ad about exactly what the digital green leaf means and who gets to participate in their Eco-Ad program, their program is just more greenwash,” said one party to the filing. (Bardelline 2011)

The bottom line? If it looks like a green certification, and functions like a green certification, it needs to behave like one behind the scenes. And if CBS continues to run this program, it’s greenwashing.

"Anyone can sell media and sprinkle a few dollars on environmental improvements and call it 'green media.'" - Paul Polizzotto, president and founder of EcoMedia (quoted in Steinberg 2011)
6. Malaysian Palm Oil Council (MPOC)

PROFILE

Palm oil is used in many foods as an alternative to vegetable oil or butter. Some estimate that half of all processed foods are made with palm oil. It is also used for cosmetics, and to create biodiesel. In Malaysia, demand for oil produced from palm tree plantations is driving rapid deforestation in some of the most important rainforest habitats for orangutans and other wildlife. (Butler 2011) The Malaysian Palm Oil Council – a semi-governmental lobby group for some of the biggest producers – has become the public face of an emerging industry.

RHETORIC

The MPOC has run a series of TV ads, focused in Europe, that variously present palm oil as great for the planet. A collection of the claims made: “Golden oil from green agriculture cools the earth, cleans the air, and fights against global warming,” “helps our planet breathe,” and oil is “sustainably produced.” (Lee 2009)

Predictably, the MPOC’s claims are mostly greenwashing. In two separate cases in 2008 and 2009, the MPOC’s television ads in the United Kingdom were challenged by the UK government’s Advertising Standards Association. Both cases were ruled against MPOC. By misleading viewers about palm oil’s impact on rainforests, the MPOC sought to hide the fact that palm oil is harmful for the environment. (Friends of the Earth International 2008) In addition, their own certification scheme remains in early stages – but unless it has strong standards, it will likely be more greenwashing.

REALITY
7. Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI)

PROFILE

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative is a certification program run by SFI, Inc., a nonprofit organization. It certifies wood and paper products under a number of different criteria, and claims to be the largest such organization, in terms of area of land certified. (Sustainable Forestry Initiative 2010)

Let’s start with a little background on wood and paper. After Earth Day 1990, faced with massive deforestation worldwide, interested parties came together to figure out what truly sustainable forest management might look like, and try to drive that forward globally. One NGO tells the story:

“Driven in part by the failure of an intergovernmental process to agree on a global forest compact, and the compelling question — what is sustainable forestry? — loggers, foresters, environmentalists, and sociologists came together in the first General Assembly to form the FSC in 1993.” (Forest Stewardship Council n.d.)

They recognized that in a confusing global marketplace for wood, pulp, and paper, everyone benefits from a clear, trustworthy label and certification. With that in mind, they created the FSC label, with various different categories and certifications.

But wait: what’s the FSC? It’s the genuinely trustworthy paper and wood certification – the Forest Stewardship Council. And there are important differences between the FSC and SFI standards.

Many in the wood industry fretted about the FSC’s efforts to make sustainable forestry truly transparent and help consumers know a product’s true source. So in 1994, the paper and timber industry founded the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. At the time it was a certification offered by the American Forest & Paper Association, the primary industry association for manufacturers and landowners. (ForestEthics 2010) In 2007, SFI broke off from the AF&PA to become its own nonprofit organization. (Navarro 2009)

Today, the SFI is a major player in the US logging and forestry industries, calling itself the dominant standard in the green market.

RHETORIC

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) is not a typical case of greenwashing, where a mischievous company makes up green accomplishments to hide its record. No, the SFI is something different: an organization whose core business is to facilitate greenwashing.

There are two types of SFI certifications: Certified Chain of Custody asserts that wood products come from forests that meet minimum standards, or from recycled paper. The Certified Sourcing labels, SFI is careful to say, “do not make claims about certified forest
content” – or, in other words, can come from almost any “non-controversial” source. (Sustainable Forestry Initiative n.d.)

Beyond that, the organization makes broad claims about how it is benefiting the environment. Through partnerships with broadly beloved groups like the Boy Scouts of America and the Audubon Society, the SFI looks to fulfill its public slogan that it is “Good For Forests.” (Sustainable Forestry Initiative 2012)

REALITY

In truth, the SFI certification is greenwashing. And it mostly comes down to this: SFI, Inc. is controlled and funded by the paper and logging industries. As pointed out in a letter backed by most of the big environmental groups in the country, “all or nearly all of SFI’s funding comes from the logging and land-holding industries.” (ForestEthics et al. 2011) [Disclosure: The Green Life Online joined as a signer of the letter.] In its official response, SFI didn’t dispute that fact. (Sustainable Forestry Initiative 2011) And on top of that, the board of directors of SFI, Inc. is heavily tilted toward industry.

Beyond this unifying issue, there are three main reasons why SFI doesn’t live up to its claims. First, the SFI standard is still sub-par in protecting forests. Second, the “Certified Sourcing” label is far more common than the more meaningful “Certified Chain of Custody” – and that ends up misleading the public. And third, the players behind the SFI program are working to undermine other green-building standards, further hurting the green movement and confusing consumers.

Let’s look at the first problem. Much of the wood that ends up in SFI-certified products is still causing unacceptable forest destruction – destruction that goes against their claims. A 2010 investigation by Forest Ethics found numerous problems on woodlands certified by SFI: landslides at high rates, even where preventable; insensitivity to species that rely on intact forests; and massive clear-cuts of forests, up to the size of 90 football fields. (ForestEthics 2010) SFI has responded to increasing pressure over recent years by bolstering one of their standards, but mostly deflects the criticism by pointing out that their advisory board includes some conservation groups. (Sustainable Forestry Initiative 2011) Until SFI’s track record improves, there is little reason to trust their claims.

Second, the SFI’s most common label, “Certified Sourcing,” is subject to a weak standard that doesn’t deserve the label “Sustainable Forestry.” As indicated above, SFI is careful to say on its website that this label does not actually mean that the product comes from certified material. Instead, there is a weaker set of guidelines, and any company that abides by them can use the label. (Sustainable Forestry Initiative 2011) We don’t object to having different levels of standards, but calling such a weak standard “sustainable forestry” is just pure greenwash. And when critics charge the SFI with greenwashing, it usually defends its entire operation purely by citing the merits of its stricter “Certified Chain of Custody” program, ignoring its weaker label. The sad truth is that customers are likely to notice the “Sustainable Forestry” tagline and logo, and won’t generally investigate to see which level of rigor was used to certify the product. Unless SFI can correct this, its whole operation is misleading.
Last, SFI and its backers are engaged in what some have called the “Rumble in the Lumberyard.” It revolves around the U.S. Green Building Council’s popular rating system, called LEED. This system has become a highly visible example of green certification, in part because many governmental and other institutional building projects have embraced it. But LEED has thus far opted to prefer the FSC wood standard over SFI. And as a result, SFI and the timber industry have alternately waged campaigns to weaken the LEED standard, get governments to stop using LEED certifications, and mandate state purchasing decisions. Ultimately, according to green building guru Lloyd Alter, “this is hurting the entire industry. If you care about green building, then you shouldn’t buy SFI.” (Alter 2012) SFI is functioning as a justification for campaigns that make it harder to protect forests. That’s bad for the planet, and it’s certainly greenwashing. As Earth Day co-founder Denis Hayes wrote, ultimately “our forests would be the losers.” (Hayes 2010)
8. Mazda

PROFILE

Mazda is a worldwide automaker based in Japan. It consistently rates as one of the most reliable and highest-ranked brands of carmakers.

RHETORIC

In February 2011, Mazda partnered with the Universal Studios film The Lorax, and produced a series of television ads, combined with a PR campaign involving public schools and libraries, to promote the Mazda CX-5.

First, a little background is informative. Originally published in 1971, The Lorax is a fable of a children’s book, by prolific author and illustrator Dr. Seuss. It’s the story of the demise of a beautiful, rich valley full of Truffula Trees and happy animals. A character named the Once-ler discovers how to use Truffula trees to make a product called Thneeds, which sell quickly. But soon, despite the Lorax’s warnings, all the trees are cut, leaving the valley a barren waste of “smogulous smoke.” For generations of environmentalists, Seuss’s story has served as a springboard, teaching about the evils of greed and overconsumption, “UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.”

In March 2011, Universal Studios released a film version of The Lorax, with Robert DeNiro, Zac Efron, and Taylor Swift as voice actors. More than 70 companies and organizations partnered with The Lorax in promotions and tie-ins. These included some obvious environmental choices like the Environmental Protection Agency, and renowned consumer product maker Seventh Generation, but they were accompanied by other, less intuitive promotions, like IHOP’s Lorax pancakes, and Hilton’s Doubletree hotels. (Confino 2012)

And what carmaker wouldn’t want to claim this beacon of all things green?

In Mazda's television spots, a computer-animated, cartoonish version of the CX-5 drives through the valley, as bright-eyed birds, bears, and eventually the Lorax tout its eco-friendliness. They don’t make any discrete factual claims, except to point out its highway gas mileage. The birds award the car a “Truffula Tree-Friendly” certification.

Eager to reach more of their target audience - families with young children - Mazda and Universal Studios paired this television campaign with another tie-in, with the National Education Association’s “Read Across America” tour. Through this partnership, schools and libraries are provided with materials to host Lorax events, and local Mazda dealerships are looped in. For each test-drive of a Mazda, the company donated $25 toward local libraries. This campaign has caught nationwide attention, and is looking to raise a million dollars. (Brown 2012)
REALITY

The truth was probably best summed up by one six-year-old from Virginia, who was at an impromptu Lorax/Mazda rally at his school. "The Lorax doesn't drive a car," he complained to a reporter. (Brown 2012)

And that’s the crux of the issue. Even though the CX-5 gets 29 miles per gallon, which is commendable and puts it near the front of the class of SUVs, it’s not the great green leap forward that The Lorax would embrace. This campaign is an attempt by Mazda to hijack a beloved environmental character and use fictional certifications to exaggerate a marginal environmental improvement. It boils down to this: the CX-5 runs on gasoline.

The CX-5 is an SUV, a class of car which has long been viewed as the epitome of wasteful consumption. As Bryan Walsh wrote in TIME Magazine, this ad employs what he calls the “Prius Fallacy: the idea that choosing more environmentally benign forms of consumption means consumption itself can help save the planet.” (Walsh 2012) Fundamentally, no gasoline-burning car can be “good for the planet.” Yes, any car that burns *slightly less gasoline* is a step in the right direction. And since most people in America rely on cars and gasoline to get around, and that isn’t easy to change. In the meantime, we need to keep taking these small steps, like improving efficiency of even big, bulky cars. And consumers who do need cars to get around should continue to opt for more efficient options.

But until our transportation system is well on its way toward ending use of fossil fuels, it’s a mistake to call any car "environmentally friendly" on its own. And in fact, we’d argue, they are better called "bad for the environment" or "slightly less bad for the planet." For Mazda, this means that the beloved Lorax’s endorsement is wishful thinking, and running an ad campaign around it is greenwashing.
The last two greenwashers we’d like to highlight are special cases. Despite not investigating any greenwashing claims between 2001 and 2008, the Federal Trade Commission is the legal body charged with filing complaints and taking action against misleading advertising claims. It is empowered to “prohibit statements likely to mislead a ‘reasonable consumer.’” (O’Connell 2010) And though this gives the agency broad jurisdiction to enforce standards, the FTC has emboldened marketers by refusing to enforce what green claims could be made. Since 2009, though, the FTC has moved to update standards and has taken dozens of actions against greenwashers. (Nelson 2010) We’ve selected two of the most notable cases.

9. BUSTED: Windex

Windex, a popular multipurpose cleaner, is manufactured by SC Johnson, Inc. And starting in 2001, SC Johnson began a labeling system called “Greenlist,” which was aimed at communicating their efforts to go green to consumers.

But the “Greenlist” label used on Windex in 2009 looked a lot like a third-party certification. And that was hardly a coincidence, according to the lawsuit filed by Wayne Koh, of Santa Cruz, CA. Saying he was accustomed to paying extra for products with certifications – greener, safer, healthier – he complained that the Windex label was intentionally misleading. (O’Connell 2010) And, under the FTC’s regulations, that was grounds for a lawsuit.

The company responded by saying it wasn’t familiar with the term “greenwash,” and therefore couldn’t be guilty of it. But in August 2011, SC Johnson settled with Mr. Koh, agreeing to modify their logo so it was clearer. (Gekas 2011)

A greenwasher caught in the act, SC Johnson had to stop using what appeared to be a third party endorsement. The lesson is clear: if a product looks like it has a third-party certification, it shouldn’t be a sham.

10. BUSTED: Tested Green

With so many products claiming to be green, certifications and labels can be helpful. “One of the challenges,” points out David Mallen of the Better Business Bureau, “is distinguishing one from the other.” (Wright 2011)

But starting in 2009, one aspiring entrepreneur came up with a new idea: create a certification label, but skip the entire part about certifying products. The result was Tested Green, a “completely bogus certifier,” in the words of Laura Koss, a senior lawyer with the FTC. (Wright 2011) Tested Green’s website claimed that it was the “nation’s leading certification program with over 45,000 certifications in the United States,” though, it turned out, that was
completely false. For $189.95, any organization could pay Tested Green for the use of their logo, or $549.95 for the “pro” designation. And in a moment of ironic genius, Tested Green itself claimed to be independently certified by two other organizations – organizations that were actually run by the same suspicious entrepreneur. (U.S. Federal Trade Commission 2011)

It’s rare today to find a straight-up case of green fraud like this one. Tested Green was in operation for more than a year before finally being shut down. And if it leaves a bad taste in your mouth – are other green claims just as untrustworthy? – it’s worth remembering that this is why greenwashing can be so damaging. Greenwashing doesn’t just mislead consumers who bought that particular product; greenwashing also undermines companies that actually are doing good. And that’s why companies must clean up their act.
What Can Consumers Do?

As a consumer trying to wade through the mess of products claiming to be green, it’s easy to feel overwhelmed and confused. One forest law expert points out that the White House swing set is made from SFI wood, while presidential invitations are printed on FSC paper. “If the White House is confused,” he notes, “everyone must be confused.” (Navarro 2009)

This is really the heart of the issue. Greenwashing can succeed because, when we’re making shopping decisions, consumers aren’t really equipped to figure out which green claims are backed up by facts, and which ones are misleading. In an ideal world, companies wouldn’t bother with greenwashing, since consumers would know better than to believe it.

Spreading the word, as we aim to do through this report, helps fight greenwashing. After all, if more people know the truth about the natural gas industry, ANGA’s ads will be less effective.

But to get to the point where greenwashing isn’t part of an advertising strategy, awareness and information are necessary but not sufficient. Concerned consumers have to come together, to take action, to make noise. Together, consumers can speak much louder in asking that companies truly go green.

So, when concerned about greenwashing, start by getting informed. And the easiest action to take is to tell a friend, and spread the word. But then, take your dollars somewhere else, and join in a public call that the companies change. And that is the way that consumers can really make an impact that goes beyond individual purchasing decisions, and convinces companies to change for the better.
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