



Don't Get

Green-washed

An astonishing number of **eco-friendly** products make claims they can't back up

BY MARIAN SCOTT FROM THE GAZETTE

MADELEINE BIRD picks up a big green bag of cat litter. "Environment friendly product," proclaims the label. This litter, it says, is biodegradable, compostable and works naturally. "Even the cat is green," Bird notes of the illustration on the bag.

Bird, an environmental-health consultant who promotes the use of ecologically friendly household products, is prowling Montreal supermarket aisles to assess "green" wares. From

chlorine-free toilet-bowl cleaners to hybrid cars, products that purport to protect the planet are popping up everywhere. You can lather your hair with shampoo that asserts it was not tested on animals, don bamboo underwear and an organic cotton T-shirt, and use your energy-efficient printer to create a letter on recycled paper with nontoxic ink.

But if buying Earth-friendly products gives you a warm, fuzzy feeling,

consider this: An astounding 99.9 percent of so-called green products make false, misleading or unsubstantiated claims, according to a study last year by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing, which has offices in Philadelphia and Ottawa. Companies have become so adept at making themselves and their products look environmentally friendly that the practice has its own name: "greenwashing."

TerraChoice investigated 1,018 green products sold in North American big-box stores and found that all but one—paper towels manufactured by a Quebec company, Cascades—made unsubstantiated, misleading or false claims. "The results were so shocking, I actually thought our staff had done

something wrong," says Scot Case, vice-president of TerraChoice. The marketing firm administers Environment Canada's EcoLogo program, which has certified more than 7,000 products from hundreds of manufacturers. (For information, visit www.ecologo.org.)

TerraChoice came up with "The Six Sins of Greenwashing" to describe the most common false and misleading product claims. [See box, below.]

ONCE A niche market for the environmentally committed, green products have gone mainstream. Seventy percent of Canadian consumers say they're willing to spend up to 20 percent more for environmentally friendly products,

says Nancy Wright, vice-president of Vancouver's Globe Foundation, which conducts market research and organizes trade shows for green businesses. In the United States, about one in five consumers say they are committed to buying such products, according to the Natural Marketing Institute, a U.S. market-research firm specializing in health, wellness and the environment.

But as the TerraChoice study shows, shoppers are on their own when it comes to telling the impostors from the genuinely green. "One challenge facing consumers is we don't have definitions for 'green products' and 'green

companies," says Joel Makower, executive editor of GreenBiz.com, based in Oakland, Calif. Manufacturers exploit that vacuum by plastering packages with words that sound good but mean little: *natural, chemical-free, biodegradable, recyclable.*

Adding to the confusion is the recycling symbol on juice bottles and paper products: three arrows forming a triangle on a light background. What does it mean? If you guessed "recycled content," you're wrong. You're also not alone.

"Marketers have figured out that most consumers don't know the difference between a product that is recyc-



The 6 Sins of Greenwashing

In the spring of 2007, TerraChoice Environmental Marketing visited six big-box stores in the United States and Canada to assess claims made for 1,018 "green" products. They noted the following "sins" committed by manufacturers:

1. Sin of the hidden trade-off: Citing a single attribute or narrow set of attributes as proof of greenness while ignoring other important environmental impacts. Examples

are bathroom cleaners that claim to be chlorine-free but may contain other toxic ingredients, and home insulation that boasts it reduces energy use but doesn't mention its lack of recycled content or manufacturing impacts such as water pollution or air emissions.

2. Sin of no proof: An environmental claim that is not supported by information on the package or company website, or by reliable third party

certification. Many facial tissues, for instance, claim to contain post-consumer recycled content but provide no evidence, such as where raw materials for the product were obtained.

3. Sin of vagueness: Claims that are so poorly defined or broad that consumers are likely to misunderstand them. These claims include:

- **Chemical-free.** Nothing is free of chemicals. Water is a chemical. All

plants, animals and humans are made of chemicals, as are all man-made products.

- **All natural.** Many poisons, including arsenic, uranium, mercury and formaldehyde, are "all natural."

- **Green, Eco-conscious and Environmentally friendly.** These claims are meaningless without elaboration.

4. Sin of irrelevance: Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) are chemicals that contribute to ozone depletion, and Canada has been phasing out CFCs for over

20 years. Nevertheless, many products announce "CFC-free" on their labels as if it were a unique environmental advantage. Examples are so-called CFC-free insecticides, lubricants, oven cleaners, shaving gels, window cleaners and disinfectants.

5. Sin of the lesser of two evils: Green claims that could be true, but fail to mention the overall damage caused by the product. Examples include organic cigarettes—even cigarettes made from all-natural tobacco can kill you—and green

insecticides and herbicides, which might be safer than other pest-control and lawn-control products, but still can be environmentally harmful.

6. Sin of fibbing: Environmental claims that are outright false, such as shampoo that claims to be certified "organic" but is not; a caulking product that claims to be Energy Star certified but isn't; and a dishwasher detergent that purports to be packaged in "100 percent recycled paper" but comes in a plastic container.



How to avoid the traps

To shop sustainably without falling prey to "greenwashing," follow these tips:

- **Read ingredients:** Avoid products that don't tell you what they contain. Without this information, it's impossible to gauge whether a product is as "green" as it claims.
- **Look for independent certification:** Many products carry seals that look eco-friendly, but do they indicate genuine third party certification? Look for Environment Canada's EcoLogo seal or Energy Star certification.
- **Reduce, reuse:** There's no question recycled paper towels are preferable to a product made from virgin fibre, but it's even greener to use a rag for most household chores. And disposable wipes that dissolve kitchen grease are certainly handy, as are foaming sprays for shower soap scum, but having a dozen specialized cleaning products adds to your environmental footprint. Disposable wipes create waste, and every container you discard—even in the recycling bin—adds to that waste. Baking soda, vinegar and vegetable-based soaps can accomplish a multitude of cleaning tasks.

lable and a product made of recycled content," says Case. In fact, the recycling symbol on a light background simply means the product or container can be recycled where facilities exist—a claim Case dismisses as meaningless.

A light symbol on a dark background means the product contains recycled material. But how much? Is it post-consumer or post-industrial-waste? Without supporting information, the recycled-content logo means little.

"BIODEGRADABLE" is another claim that sounds more green than it really is. "Most of the time, consumers throw these products in the garbage and they go into landfill," says Case. "They don't degrade for thousands of years." Often, products such as discarded paper don't degrade for decades in landfills—major sources of methane gas, which contributes to global warming. "Don't make a purchasing decision based on a 'biodegradable' label unless you plan to compost it yourself," says Case.

Terms like "natural" and "free-range" can also be misleading, says Urvashi Rangan, senior scientist and policy analyst for the Consumers Union in Yonkers, N.Y., publisher of *Consumer Reports* magazine. Meat labelled "natural" might have been treated with antibiotics, and a chicken labelled "free-range" might never have gone outside. "It just means it had the option of going outside for an unspecified period," says Rangan. "It could mean nothing."

Manufacturers often tout soft drinks,

juice cocktails, jam and other products as natural even though they contain high-fructose corn syrup, a highly processed sugar substitute. In 2006 the U.S.-based Centre for Science in the Public Interest threatened to sue Cadbury Schweppes for labelling 7UP "100 percent natural" even though it contains corn syrup. The food giant later amended 7UP labels to read "100 percent natural flavours."

But Stephen Gardner, director of litigation for the nonprofit centre, says many other food products containing the syrup claim to be natural. "People want to eat natural foods," says Gardner. "The corporations know it and they slap the 'natural' label on products. They know damn well they aren't."

Last year, yogawear chain Lulule-

mon Athletica retracted health claims about garments that contained fibre from seaweed after *The New York Times* exposed the claims as false. Labels asserted vitamins and amino acids in the garments could be absorbed by the skin to reduce stress. A lab test commissioned by the newspaper showed no significant difference between the seaweed fabric and regular cotton.

Striving towards a greener shopping cart takes research. But becoming an environmentally conscious shopper is a worthwhile exercise, says Case. "It's a way of teaching people that their actions do have environmental consequences," he says. "That kind of education is a prerequisite for a truly sustainable society."

YOUNG IDEAS

A friend and his five-year-old son were heading home after a soccer game. Assuming the boy's subdued mood was due to his team's loss, my friend tried to reassure him that he had done a good job, even though he had played in only part of the game. "But, Dad," the boy said, "the coach told me to sit out for a quarter. And he hasn't paid me yet."

TOM HORNER

My husband and I recently rented a video to watch with our two young sons. Much to our dismay, the movie was very violent, given its rating. We watched as two dragons played tug-of-war with a man, trying to tear him apart. But our three-year-old was upset for a slightly different reason. "Mama," he scolded, "those dragons aren't sharing that man."

JILL RONAN

Our second-grader brought home a report card that didn't meet our expectations. After dinner, my husband sat the boy on his knee and said, "Son, we're going to have to do something about these grades."

"We can't, Dad," our son replied. "They're in ink."

LYNNE ADAMS