

MountainKeeping Column for Dec. 6

Greenwashing, A National Scandal

By J.A. Jones

Walk into any big-box retail store these days, and you will be greeted by hundreds of items – from toothpaste to shampoo, cleaning products, office paper, granola bars, you name it – advertising themselves as eco-friendly. You may choose one of those products *primarily* because it claims to be “natural” or “made from recycled products.”

But a recent study shows that 99.9% of those claims are just plain lies.

The environmental marketing firm TerraChoice researched the “green” claims found on 1,018 common consumer products. Only a single product out of that thousand – one brand of paper napkins – made claims that were true.

“There were examples of shampoos that claimed to be certified organic, yet when we investigated and tried to find any sort of evidence of certification, we found none,” said a spokesman for TerraChoice.

This sort of misrepresentation, aimed at a gullible public eager to be more earth-friendly, is called “greenwashing.” TerraChoice defines the verb “to greenwash” this way: “the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service.”

### **The Six Sins of Greenwashing**

- **The Sin of the Hidden Tradeoff** ... suggesting a produce is “green” based on a single environmental attribute (like “recycled paper”) without attention to other issues (like energy use, global warming, water, and forestry impacts).
- **The Sin of No Proof** ... environmental claims that cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or by a reliable third-party (like household lamps and lights that promote their energy efficiency without any supporting evidence or certification).
- **The Sin of Vagueness** ... claims that are so poorly defined or broad as to be deliberately misleading (like “chemical-free,” “non-toxic,” and “all natural”).
- **The Sin of Irrelevance** ... environmental claims that may be truthful but are unhelpful or, again, misleading (like claiming that “no chlorofluorocarbons were used in manufacturing this product,” simply because chlorofluorocarbons have been legally banned for almost 30 years; hence, *no* products are manufactured with them – it’s a totally irrelevant claim).

- **The Sin of the Lesser of Two Evils** ... “green” claims that may be true within the product category but which distract the consumer from the greater environmental impacts of the category of product as a whole (like “organic” cigarettes or “green” insecticides and herbicides).

- **The Sin of Fibbing** ... a.k.a, outright lies (like a caulking product that claims to be “Energy Star” registered, while the Energy Star website suggests the claim is false, or the dishwasher detergent that says it’s packaged in “100% recycled paper” yet comes packaged in plastic).

For more information, go to

<http://www.terrachoice.com/Home/Six%20Sins%20of%20Greenwashing>. Additional resources on “greenwashing” can be found at <http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Greenwashing>.

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