



Greenwash taints most 'eco-friendly' claims

Ninety-eight per cent of the products in our stores claiming to be environmentally friendly are guilty of greenwash, a US committee hears

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Natural. Non-toxic. Biodegradable. It's possible for manufacturers to cover a multitude of environmental sins with a carefully – if inaccurately – chosen word. And most of them do, as a US House of Representatives committee on greenwash recently found.

The House sub-committee on commerce, trade and consumer protection heard evidence in June from TerraChoice, the environmental marketing firm behind the Seven Sins of Greenwashing report, which assessed the claims made by manufacturers keen to cash in on the growing popularity for environmentally friendly products.

The research revealed that 98 per cent of the 2,219 products tested in the US and Canada committed at least one greenwashing sin. Only 25 products were 'sin-free'.

Almost 4,000 products in the UK, US, Canada and Australia were judged according to the six categories identified by TerraChoice in its 2007 Sins of Greenwashing report: sins of the hidden trade-off; sins of no proof; sins of vagueness; sins of irrelevance; sins of lesser of two evils – for example calling a cigarette 'organic' – and sins of fibbing.

To this pantheon of disingenuousness the 2009 report added a seventh, the sin of worshipping false labels: 'exploiting consumers' demand for third-party certification by creating fake labels or false suggestions of third-party endorsements'.

The majority of UK greenwash concerned the sin of the hidden trade-off – suggesting a product is green based on a narrow set of attributes without attention to other environmental issues – with most greenwashing taking place in the health and beauty category.

The amount of 'green' products per store had increased by an average of 79 per cent since 2007, the report found, while another as-yet-unpublished TerraChoice report reveals that green advertising has increased tenfold over the past 20 years, and almost tripled since 2006.

Encouragingly, legitimate green advertising is almost twice as common in 2009 (23 per cent) as it was in 2007 (14 per cent). TerraChoice runs the EcoLogo certificate, and recognises other eco-labels including FSC, Green Guard, GreenSeal and SFI.

