



BBC
SOUNDS
Rare Earth:
 Listen to the
 episode on
 greenwashing.
 Hush! Don't Mention
 the Environment

These Extinction Rebellion protesters are making a mockery of greenwashing.

PROTESTERS: PA IMAGES ALAMY



OPINION

“Nature is used as a deception tactic in product names, on packaging, and in advertising”

MARK CARWARDINE

THERE ARE FOUR BUZZWORDS THAT make me decidedly irritable: ‘eco-friendly’, ‘sustainable’, ‘natural’ and ‘green’. They’re sprinkled with abandon everywhere you look – from food and toiletries to clothing and cars. How many times have you seen companies use nature as a deception tactic in their product names, on their packaging, and in their advertising? They use the colour green and images of lush forests, beautiful butterflies or pristine rivers to send a subliminal message: we care about the birds and the bees. Or they use official-looking labels (‘please recycle’ is a good one) to con their customers into believing they care about the environment.

Greenwashing comes in many guises. One of the earliest examples was in 2009, when Volkswagen launched a wide-reaching marketing campaign to promote a drastic reduction in the exhaust pipe emissions of its new cars; we now know that it had cheated emissions tests for 11 million cars (which an investigation by the US Environmental Protection Agency found were actually producing nitrogen oxide emissions up to 40 times the US legal limit). At the other end of the scale, many hotels urge their guests to have their towels washed less frequently to ‘save energy’ or ‘save water’. Do they really care about the environment or is it just a great way to cut laundry costs?

Greenwashing is everywhere. Take the travel industry. One polar cruise company actually claims to “ensure that the earth remains a place humanity and all life can

thrive”; it would be laughable if it weren’t such an outrageous and misleading pretence. Meanwhile, some airlines have the audacity to encourage passengers to buy carbon offsetting credits – ostensibly a positive move, but all they’re doing is passing the buck (shifting responsibility for the negative impact of air travel onto their customers).

A lot of greenwashing is more subtle. Many companies cherry-pick information to give the impression that their environmental impact is better than it is. They tout single-use plastics, for example, to draw attention away from the harmful activities making up most of their business practices.

“There is still no legal definition for ‘greenwashing’ but there is a push for greater transparency”

It can be achieved by omission, too. Defra recently decided to allow the Scottish salmon farming industry to drop the word ‘farmed’ from its labelling – a change from ‘Scottish farmed salmon’ to ‘Scottish salmon’. It looks like blatant greenwashing. People need to know the true origin of the products they are buying to make informed decisions. (Admittedly, I take delight in the fact that even the salmon industry seems to acknowledge that farmed salmon is bad for the environment and bad for the salmon; otherwise, why would they want it removed from their labels?)

There is still no legal definition of ‘greenwashing’, but the good news is that there is a push for greater transparency. In Europe, the great reckoning began this year with landmark greenwashing legislation, the EU Green Claims Directive. This tough law requires businesses to provide substantial evidence verified by an independent third party to support any environmental claims.

→ AT A GLANCE

- Many companies are working hard to reduce the negative environmental impacts of their products and services. But others are greenwashing – jumping on the sustainability bandwagon, merely to look good.
- Greenwashing – a term coined in 1986 by American environmentalist Jay Westerveld – describes the act of making false or misleading statements about the environmental benefits of a company, product or practice.
- Going green sells, by gaining a competitive advantage over rivals and appealing to environmentally aware consumers (who are willing to pay higher prices for sustainable products).
- The fear is that greenwashing undermines credible efforts to protect wildlife and wild places and to tackle climate change.

In the UK we have the UK Green Claims Code, which is a voluntary code of conduct consisting of a six-point checklist to help companies ensure their claims about sustainability are genuine. This can be used to enforce existing customer protection laws. Companies that are found to have broken the Green Claims Code now face civil penalties of up to 10 per cent of their global turnover, which for large firms can amount to millions of pounds.

I plan to remain cynical (which, luckily, is my default position). If in doubt, I won’t buy. If it’s blatant greenwashing, I’ll report it to the Advertising Standards Authority, the Competition and Markets Authority or the Financial Conduct Authority. **11**

Want to comment?
 Share your thoughts on Mark’s column by sending an email to wildlifeletters@ourmedia.co.uk