



ADVANCING CONSERVATION THROUGH  
**EMPATHY FOR WILDLIFE**

# How to Spot Greenwashing

This document explores greenwashing and how to avoid it.

December 2023

Content by: Sarah Pancioli, Advancing Empathy Coordinator, Woodland Park Zoo, and the ACE for Wildlife Conservation Action Committee.



[www.zoo.org/empathy](http://www.zoo.org/empathy)

Contact: [empathy@zoo.org](mailto:empathy@zoo.org)



## About Our Network

The Advancing Conservation through Empathy (ACE) for Wildlife Network is a learning network that brings together motivated professionals to create and share effective practices to foster empathy for animals and people, leading to conservation actions. Due to the geographic priorities of our generous private donor, the ACE for Wildlife Network was established in 2019 to support the 20 Association of Zoos and Aquariums® (AZA) accredited zoos and aquariums in Alaska, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Washington and Wisconsin. These organizations are referred to as Partners. Since that time, we have extended our Network through an Affiliate status. We currently have over 350 Members and Affiliates in over 30 U.S. states and three continents. Staffed by Woodland Park Zoo, the Network believes we are stronger together, and pride ourselves in being a Network driven by participant priorities.

## About the Conservation Action Committee

The Conservation Action Committee was started in 2022 with a mission to share a common vision to promote Partner conservation missions and motivate visitors to take conservation action. One of the committee's goals is to coordinate joint conservation action campaigns to maximize our impact. This resource was created to support Partners' efforts to educate their guests about the issue of greenwashing.



# Greenwashing: The Basics

## What is greenwashing?

Greenwashing happens when companies capitalize on the growing demand for eco-friendly products by marketing their products with false or misleading claims about their sustainability.

## Why do companies greenwash?

There is an increased demand for environmental products from consumers. Companies see this as an opportunity to deceitfully market themselves as environmental to increase their profits.

## How do companies greenwash?

Greenwashing comes in many different forms. A company could disguise their product as environmental by wrapping it in green colors and adding environmental buzzwords that are not regulated. They can make false or misleading claims. They may even focus on one environmental accomplishment they have achieved while ignoring several unsustainable practices. The following pages will further explore the ways that companies can greenwash.



## Examples of Greenwashing

### Misleading Claims

When companies make false or misleading claims that persuade consumers to buy their products. Examples include:

- Claiming something is made with all natural ingredients. In reality only one ingredient has to be natural to make this claim.
- Products that claim to be compostable but are only "commercially" compostable. This requires the product to be brought to a facility that can commercially compost the product, which in turn requires large amounts of energy and heat to break it down.

### Packaging

A tactic that manipulates customers by making packaging look eco-friendly. Look out for products that have:

- Green or earthy tones
- Nature scenery or wild animals

### Vague Green-sounding Language

When looking for a green product, you may come across phrases that sound environmental, but are not backed up by any evidence or certifications. Some of these buzz words include:

- eco-conscious
- socially responsible
- green
- all natural



## Lack of Transparency or Proof

When companies fail to provide proof for environmental claims about their product or company practices. For example:

- Claiming to offset their carbon footprint by using carbon credits, without providing any information about their specific carbon offset project. Learn more about carbon credits [here](#).
- Saying a product was made with a certain percentage of post-consumer recyclables without providing any proof.

## Irrelevance

Claims that are correct, but do not actually contribute to a company's environmentalism:

- A company could claim they do not use any chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in their product, but CFCs are already widely banned so the claim is irrelevant.
- A meat factory saying their poultry contains no hormones, but hormones are already banned in poultry.

## Hidden Trade Offs

A company highlights one environmental thing they have achieved, while the rest of their product is harmful to the environment:

- Labeling an SUV as more fuel efficient, even though the car is still polluting the environment.
- A company might boast that they invested \$100,000 in renewable energy, but they do not mention they have invested \$1 million in drilling for oil in a sensitive location.



# How to Avoid Being Greenwashed

## Be a Skeptic

Companies should be responsible for remaining transparent about the “greenness” of their products, but we all know we are a long way from achieving this. Unfortunately, this puts a lot of responsibility on the consumer. Avoiding greenwashing means staying vigilant and skeptical about what a company claims, and how it markets its products.

## Look for Certifications

Good news! There are certifications that are verified and can help guide decisions when buying products. Some of these include:



EPA Safer Choice



Green Seal Certified



Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil



Forest Safe Certified



Fair Trade Certified

## Apps for Evaluating Products

- Think Dirty
- GoodGuide
- Cheyenne Zoo palm oil scanner app
- CodeCheck



## References and Further Reading

[7 Tips to Avoid Greenwashing](#)

[What is Greenwashing? How it Works, Examples, and Statistics](#)

[How to Prevent Greenwashing in 2023](#)

[What is Greenwashing? How to Spot It and Stop it](#)

[Here are the 7 Sins of Greenwashing](#)

[How Corporations Use Greenwashing to Convince you they are Battling Climate Change](#)