

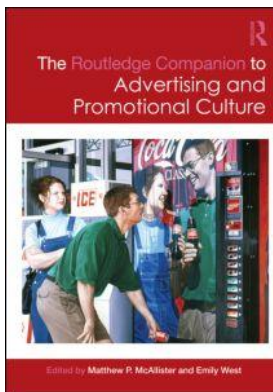
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Section VIII

THE ENVIRONMENT

THE “CRYING INDIAN,” CORPORATIONS, AND ENVIRONMENTALISM: A HALF-CENTURY OF STRUGGLE OVER ENVIRONMENTAL MESSAGING

Robin Andersen

On April 22, 1970, almost 20 million people assembled on Earth Day, and a grass-roots movement sprang to life to protest the destruction of the environment, proclaim its commitment to the earth, and define the 1970s as the Environmental Decade.¹ The following year, on the second spring day dedicated to the earth, a public service announcement against littering produced by Keep America Beautiful, Inc. (KAB) aired on television for the first time. It would be heralded by the Advertising Educational Foundation (2003) as “synonymous with environmental concern.”

Few who saw the spot could forget Iron Eyes Cody, America’s most famous Native American, paddling his hand-hewn canoe over a once-pristine river, now strewn with floating litter. As the music builds and the sun lowers, he rows through a bleak urban harbor, complete with burning smoke stacks. At river’s edge he pulls his boat onto the bank, encountering even more litter and trash. He walks up the bank and finds himself standing along a congested interstate as the deep voice of actor William Conrad intones, “Some people have a deep, abiding respect for the natural beauty that was once this country, and some people don’t.” Over the words a bag of trash is hurled from a car window and breaks apart at his feet. The camera pans from the garbage, up his fringed buckskin costume, and, as it reaches his face and he turns his head to look directly into the eyes of America, a heavy tear rolls down his cheek. The narrator declares, “People start pollution. People can stop it.”

The Crying Indian lives on and is now considered a classic work of artistic persuasion, one that *Advertising Age* included in its list of the century's top 100 best efforts (Garfield 2009). A different, admittedly curmudgeonly assessment (one echoed over the years in the comments of many others) was offered by Ted Williams in *Audubon Magazine* in 1990: "My thoughts on the weeping Indian ad are that it's the single most obnoxious, commercial ever produced" (132). So powerful was the public service announcement created by KAB that it remains the subject of articles, journalistic commentaries, and investigations, and now, available on YouTube ("The Crying Indian" 2007), it inspires the opinions of netizens.

These two iconic moments, Earth Day and a year later the release of KAB's public service announcement, serve as the cornerstones for understanding the relationship between advertising and the struggle for environmental conservation. The groundswell of citizen action that was the first Earth Day expressed what is now a common understanding: the unwanted side effects of manufacturing and consumption wreak havoc on the natural world. Earth Day and the Crying Indian were both responses to the booming consumer culture that gave them birth, and, though on the surface they appear to be united in their mutual quest to preserve the environment, they actually represent two very different, competing sets of interests and values. Indeed, locked in a battle over half a century, those divergent interests continue to struggle, engaging in a fight between the powerful forces of industry and those concerned with conservation.

Through its skilled use of exacting visual rhetoric, deep-seated mythologies, and careful production qualities, the Crying Indian remains one of the players in this drama, and so too is the corporate-sponsored organization Keep America Beautiful. The mythic, emotional shot across the bow of environmentalism, delivered with the help of the formidable Advertising Council, continues to influence the ways in which nature and the environment are narrated through advertising and much of the media. Taking a look back at the confluence of forces that produced the public service announcement will tell us much about contemporary "green" advertising and marketing, and the struggle for a sustainable future.

This chapter locates the successful use of KAB's persuasive message at the center of the disconnect between corporate promotional imagery and industrial practice. The dynamics of this message would be repeated in campaigns too numerous to document here, but we offer case studies emblematic of these processes, including the commodification of water and current threats to the water supply. We find that KAB's use of the imagery of water and tears is still used both to cover and to illuminate the most prescient environmental concerns. As we track recent developments in hyper-consumption, we understand the role of strategic messaging and new media in the discourse and practices that perpetuate environmental degradation, yet it is in that realm that we also find effective resistance. We conclude by arguing for the necessity of a fundamental shift in legal and regulatory concepts, those articulated in the realms of science, law, and civil society, and we challenge the purveyors of symbolic communication to use their considerable powers of persuasion to facilitate conservation efforts instead of the earth's destruction.

The Back Story of Iron Eyes Cody

Woven into the hidden story of the Crying Indian are his mythic origins, his real identity, the interests he served, and the effects of his image on helping frame the debate about consumer culture and environmental regulation at mid-twentieth century. In 1999,

anthropologist Shepard Krech opened his book titled *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* with the Crying Indian as the best example of the stereotyping of the first Americans. His book challenges the simple myths of the “Noble Savage”—set in contrast to white polluters—in strict harmony with a pristine environment.² The notion of the “savage,” which dates back to European colonizers and early settlers, contains within it a simple binary, easily flipped to the “ignoble savage,” a menacing malignancy who is cannibalistic and bloodthirsty. Thus we have a figure at once admired, while also needing to be “tamed” and ultimately destroyed. Another writer refers to Iron Eyes Cody as “a black-braided, buckskinned, cigar-store native come to life, complete with a single feather and a stoic frown” (Strand 2008). Though a flat, cardboard copy of the multi-dimensional humanity of Native Americans, one confirmed through the endless televised westerns of the 1940s and 1950s, the mythic crying face touched an undeniable chord of melancholy for what was being trampled in the long march of economic progress.

The Crying Indian has inspired books, investigations, and celebration, but he was not really crying, nor was he an Indian. An Italian American with the given name Espera Oscar DeCorti, Cody fooled even anthropologist Krech, who identifies him as a Cherokee actor (1999: 15). He wore a wig, and his dark complexion was made darker with make-up, but he was a dedicated Indian rights supporter married to an Indian, with adopted Indian children (Strand 2008). Much more important than the details of his personal identity are the construction of the message he delivered, and the motivations behind the organizations that created it. His direct gaze into the camera told all watching that, since they started pollution, only they could stop it. One recent YouTube viewer of the spot responded with “This commercial scared the crap? out of me when I was a kid” (“The Crying Indian” 2007). His message was a personal indictment, and as a public service announcement it reached for the most difficult of all persuasive goals, to change individual behavior on a mass scale. And change it did.³ Littering became totally passé. At the height of the campaign, 2,000 people a month wrote letters wanting to join their local anti-littering teams. By the end of the campaign in 1983, Keep America Beautiful claimed to have reduced litter by as much as 88 percent in 300 communities, 38 states, and several countries (Advertising Education Foundation 2003).

But why was Cody’s message so personal and confrontational? Answering that question gets us knee-deep into the buried history of litter and its connections to trash and the unwanted side effects, and extractive excesses, of consumption. Writers and scholars have also done some digging into this issue. As late as 2008, Cody caught the attention of New York-based environmental reporter Ginger Strand, who wrote in *Orion Magazine* that the campaign was aimed at forestalling a public discussion of the wisdom of disposable containers of all sorts. The message delivered by the Crying Indian popularized the corporate response to pollution that “the trouble was not their industry’s promulgation of throwaway stuff; the trouble was those oafs who threw it away” (Strand 2008). Individual responsibility, a foundational cultural concept to this day, would be the solution to pollution. The focus on individual responsibility coincided with the corporate push toward disposable consumption after World War II, as the next section reviews.

Post-War Aluminum and the Construction of Disposable Culture

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Army Corps of Engineers dammed hundreds of American rivers, providing the energy needed to supply aluminum to the war effort.

The convergence of cheap energy and the technology to process aluminum met the needs of World War II, and left manufacturers poised for a disposable economy. The wildly successful increase in production left a glut of the metal when the war ended, and using aluminum sheets for cans became more profitable than the sale of all other aluminum products combined (Strand 2008). Part of the massive expansion of consumer culture during the 1950s involved the movement away from reusable containers and toward throwaways.

In the early 1950s, refillable containers accounted for 95 percent of all beverage containers, but by the end of the decade half of all beer, the first beverage industry to take advantage of aluminum, would be supplied in throwaway containers. Disposable bottles, cans, and food containers, and the mobile culture of the automobile combined to produce unsightly roadside litter. This unwanted side effect of America's particular version of economic progress could not be overlooked by public officials or captains of industry. Indeed, the Vermont state legislature passed a law in 1953 banning the sale of disposable containers, requiring that beer be sold in reusable bottles (Williams 1990). The American Can Company led the charge to stop such legislation and vowed to teach Americans to stop throwing cans and other trash out of car windows. Keep America Beautiful was born in 1954, supported by a variety of industries, most notably the manufacturers of beer and soft drinks, and the bottles and cans that deliver them. SourceWatch, part of the Center for Media and Democracy, has a webpage explaining the organization Keep America Beautiful and its long association with industries that have a keen economic interest in preventing environmental legislation, especially bottle bills. Today, the "social responsibility" partners—companies that donate at least \$500,000 to KAB—include the Aluminum Association, Waste Management, Nestlé Waters, PepsiCo, and Philip Morris USA; other corporate partners include Coca-Cola and Anheuser-Busch.⁴

The Advertising Council: Consumption, Democracy, and Rebellion

Through the 1950s industries at the forefront of the new disposable culture struggled to formulate a winning anti-littering message, one powerful enough to change behavior. It was a tall order for the architects of persuasion, who were increasingly frustrated with public resistance. Their previous messages featuring "Suzie Spotless" scolding her "litterbug" father, and pigs rummaging through trashcans, had failed (Advertising Educational Foundation 2003). The formidable Advertising Council was enlisted, and with help from the PR firm Burson-Marsteller⁵ it sought to change American behavior. At mid-century the Ad Council had successfully produced ads that equated American freedoms to mass consumption.

As Stuart Ewen (1976, 1988) has argued in his extensive writings on consumer culture, advertising played an essential role in forging associations between commodity culture, with its attendant rhetoric of choice, and American democracy. But the Crying Indian took this quintessential American message a step further by adopting what had become a counter-cultural symbol of rebellion. Strand rightly observes that movies such as *Little Big Man* (1970) and books critical of white-Indian relations such as Vine Deloria's (1969: 265) scathing rejection of "consumer mania which plagues society as a whole" in *Custer Died for Your Sins* positioned Native Americans as symbols of resistance to dominant culture and politics at the turn of the decade. As the Vietnam War dragged on, anti-war demonstrators donned the dress of Native

Americans, and the headband was a ubiquitous accoutrement of a rebellious counter-culture. Strand (2008) writes: “In adopting the Indian as a symbol but turning his rejection of consumerism into a rebuke to individual laziness, [they] struck greenwash gold. Their Indian evoked the deep discontents afoot in the culture. But they co-opted the icon of resistance and made him support the interests of the very consumer culture he appeared to protest.” His sad countenance admonished individuals rather than identifying the ideology of waste and destruction embedded within corporate planning and progress. More harshly, almost 20 years earlier, Ted Williams railed against the cynical use of the image (1990: 132), calling it “the ultimate exploitation of Native Americans: First we kicked them off their land, then we trashed it, and now we’ve got them whoring for the trashmakers.”

The Most Successful “Greenwashing” Campaign

With the help of Iron Eyes Cody, pollution came to be defined as that which can be seen, its elimination a matter of keeping the unwanted side effects of consumption out of sight. The conflation of *pollution* with *litter* also presented a simple solution to environmental destruction, one that could easily be addressed by an “information” campaign, making it safe from actual conservation policies. A message designed to obscure, hide, and redefine the environmental consequences of commodity production is the very definition of *greenwashing*. One study compared corporate environmental policies to a company’s use of “green” advertising, and found that companies that lagged behind in the implementation of environmental safeguards had not focused on reducing their environmental footprint, but instead focused on increasing their “socially responsible” promotions and advertising (Kuk, Fokeer, and Hung 2006).

The Indian’s tearful message may have been the first instance of greenwashing, and it was certainly an inauspicious moment in the early struggle between conservation and consumption. His legacy may be measured by the huge mountain of garbage Americans throw away each year, and today non-returnable beverage cans and plastic bottles remain at the top of the pile. As the Container Recycling Institute reports, “beverage containers are variously reported at 30 to 50 percent of the litter stream” (2011). In addition, the recycling rate of plastic bottles has declined to just 23 percent annually. A recent report by Ocean Conservancy (2009) lists beverage containers in the top ten most common items found in marine debris. After cigarettes and filters, plastic bags, and food containers, the next most abundant groupings of disposables found in ocean trash are plastic and glass beverage bottles and cans, and caps and lids.

The Crying Indian is an icon of American consumer culture and a testament to a successful persuasive strategy with great cultural resonance and environmental consequences.⁶ The corporate motivations that led to his creation and the anti-regulatory successes that followed defined a moment and left a blueprint for understanding the patterns that have come to define the ways in which advertising and other media promotions have been deployed to represent the environment in consumer culture. As we will see, in numerous campaigns to follow we find similar struggles between industry and those who seek to contain its impact through regulatory or legal means. We also find advertising—using the latest techniques and Internet technologies—serving as mediator between those forces, a kind of virtual shield behind which industry practices continue apace.

Celebrating the Natural World in Advertising

Today, advertising's compelling persuasions celebrate the beauty, power, and necessity of nature, sometimes pristine, sometimes highly managed, but always capable of co-existing within the given historical parameters of consumption as we know it. The allure, ambiance, abundance, and qualities of what is "natural" are to be found in every product under the sun and, in advertising, always compatible with the logics and values of consumption. The ubiquitous, yet arbitrary, associations forged between products and nature have become so commonplace that the incoherence of such persuasions is rarely of note. Unlike the ugly pollution that caused Iron Eyes Cody to cry, the version of nature brought to you by today's corporate imaging is blissfully pristine and uncontaminated, unspoiled by overextraction and waste. To illustrate these points, we will turn our attention to a few examples of products with no necessary connections to the flora and fauna of lush ecosystems, but that nonetheless are marketed using nature as the primary selling point.

Pure Water, Nature, and Sugary Drinks

In a fertile meadow, a Coca-Cola at his side, a young man is shown in a video advertisement enjoying a pastoral setting when a ladybug alights on top of the soda bottle. Presently more insects are drawn to the bottle, and grasshoppers, bees, dragonflies, caterpillars, and butterflies work together to steal the prized possession. They carry the Coke off and pour it into a natural spring, replacing the water with the sugary drink. In another soda ad, this one from Coca-Cola's main competitor, PepsiCo, the same kind of connection to a pristine natural setting is forged in a print advertisement for Sierra Mist Natural. The soda can sits in front of a picture of lush greens and blue water. Foregrounded with wildflowers and framed with snow-covered mountain peaks, an alpine lake is nestled into a watershed of pine trees. The text printed in white against a billowy-clouded blue sky reads "It's the most refreshing thing I've seen since me.—*Lake.*" At the bottom, "It's the soda nature would drink if nature drank soda." As one company executive said, "Who better to testify to the refreshingly natural ingredients of new Sierra Mist Natural than nature itself?" (PepsiCo 2010).⁷

One might ask of these marketing strategies why calorific, sugary drinks with no nutritional value cannot simply be hawked by extolling the primary product benefit—the sensation that occurs when the carbonated beverage first explodes on the tongue, delivering the sweet pulse of taste that fizzes through the mouth and then down the throat. Indeed, an enormous amount of money is spent on extensive research developing just the right measure of ingredients able repeatedly to deliver on the promise of such sensations, which are now part of the expectations of habituated consumers.⁸ To answer that question, we must consider the issue of water, as it is no coincidence that the rhetorics of both ads declare an unquestioned unity between pure, abundant water and the manufactured soda. The visual representations of a natural spring and a mountain lake are virtual cover-ups for the actual depletion of water resources. They offer only perception-based solutions to the environmental destruction caused by the manufacture of the products.

Coca-Cola and Water Resources in India

In 1999, when the Coke factory opened in the village of Kala Dera, in the arid state of Rajasthan, India, it tapped into the same aquifers used by local farmers who grow barley,

millet, and peanuts. The plant’s use of about 900,000 liters of water a year to make the drink and clean the machinery led to water shortages. A coalition of local farmers, community activists, and global water conservation groups succeeded in bringing the issue to the attention of the international press. One story aired on *PBS NewsHour* quoted a farmer complaining, “Before, the water level was descending by about 1 foot per year. Now it’s 10 feet every year. We have a 3.5-horsepower motor. We cannot cope. They have a 50-horsepower pump” (Ifill 2008). As drought conditions in the region worsened and the water table lowered, farmers were forced to re-drill their wells. “It’s [the water] down to 260 feet. Five years ago, it was 180 feet” (Ifill 2008).

Coca-Cola agreed to an independent third-party assessment by the Delhi-based Energy and Resources Institute of some of its operations in India, which include 49 factories. That report found the plant was contributing to worsening water shortages and recommended that the company either bring water in from the outside or shut the factory down. Coca-Cola refused to accept the study’s findings or act on the recommendations. The government also drew criticism for attracting Coca-Cola to a water-scarce region with no water policy or restrictions in a rush to attract industry and foreign investment. Scientist Leena Srivastava from the Institute warned: “At stake is the nation’s food supply. We are heading very rapidly towards the situation of absolute scarcity” (Ifill 2008).

Because of the effectiveness of activist groups that tapped into anti-globalization and other environmental and green organizations across the world, Coke came under considerable international scrutiny. Coca-Cola’s manager of environmental affairs said in 2005 that the company understood the need for a PR campaign around the issue of water use: “We need to manage this issue or it will manage us”; Coke reported that its water efficiency improved by 6 percent between 2003 and 2004, although still requiring 2.72 liters of water to produce 1 liter of the soft drink (“Coca-Cola” 2005). But water depletion at other plants in India continued, and by the end of 2009 a severe drought hit the Bundelkhand region in northern India, destroying crops and livelihoods. A major demonstration took place at the Mehdiganj bottling plant, where water levels had dropped 6 meters since the bottling plant was opened in 2000 (Levitt 2009). Because 70 percent of Indians make their living from agriculture, northern India offered a terrible example of what happens when the water runs dry. Tom Palakudiyil from Water Aid noted: “Although never a lush region, the area has now completely lost the ability to sustain small-scale agriculture” (Levitt 2009: 2). Now farmers are migrating into a world of poverty in the cities.

As Amit Srivastava (2008) from the India Resource Center has observed, today if one visits the Coca-Cola website, after clicking on the Live Positively campaign button, it might seem to be an accidental detour to the site of a water conservation NGO. Slick graphics, position papers, and international conferences are all featured, illustrated with pictures of village people from all over the world. Coke has no interest in pulling out of the country even in the face of increasing drought caused by climate change and a pending lawsuit in Kerala state.⁹ Instead, in 2007 the company launched its public relations campaign with a concept paper promising to be “water neutral” in India by 2009. But the company’s own internal documents admit that water neutrality is impossible: “In a strict sense, the term ‘water neutrality’ is troublesome and even may be misleading” (quoted in Srivastava 2008). However, the benefits of the PR term outweigh its lack of substance: “It is pragmatic to use a troublesome and misleading (but attractive) term like water neutrality—which is impossible to achieve—because it resonates well with the media, officials and NGOs. Welcome to Coca-Cola’s world” (Srivastava 2008).

Coke is certainly not the first company to address bad environmental press with green campaigning instead of meaningful conservation policies or financial redress. One study found that public concern for environmental issues led companies to alter their green marketing strategies more often than their corporate environmental strategies. It also showed that firms obtained quick benefits through such environmental marketing (Banerjee, Iyer, and Kashyap 2003). Indeed, contracts once cancelled on college campuses have been renewed, and Coke now has an extensive “Give It Back” campaign where recycling bins sit next to vending machines and company promotions claim they will recover 50 percent of the bottles and cans used annually. What better place to benefit from images of corporate responsibility than a college campus, where easy recycling of a small portion of the company’s waste brings valuable PR to a desirable market and continues to forestall environmental legislation that would be far more effective in reducing the litter stream? And, once again, individuals are primarily responsible for anti-pollution efforts.

The soda divisions of both Coke and Pepsi account for only a portion of the overall environmental impact caused by the multiplicity of products offered by both beverage giants. Indeed, the PR and imaging battles over soda are only part of the on-going struggle over beverage containers. Water itself has become one of the most significant environmental issues for contemporary consumer culture, one that involves energy consumption and emissions, a life-sustaining natural resource, an expanding ocean gyre, and the advertising and marketing behind it.

Bottled Water

As the consumer economy continued apace, by the end of the twentieth century new innovations in plastic containers, combined with advertising’s impressive and relentless use of nature as a “hook” for advertising, would lead to a previously unimagined shift in consumer buying patterns—the ubiquitous, individual, portable, plastic bottle of water. There is now a considerable amount of evidence attesting to the destructive effects of bottled water on the environment, and on the human body. Buying water in plastic bottles has been accepted by consumers as the healthy choice. But the Harvard School of Public Health found that people who frequently drink from clear plastic bottles have 69 percent more bisphenol in their systems—the chemical used to make plastic bottles (Dayton 2010). In addition, a range of toxins from industrial fertilizer residue to solvents appear in popular brands (Louaillier 2010). Ironically, the perceived need that led to the practice of buying and carrying one’s own continuous supply of water was sold to the American public through images of pristine natural settings (for a discussion of water bottle technology and the symbolic power of nature symbols in advertising, see Andersen 2000). From the snow-covered mountains of Evian ads that promised vitality and health from the spirit and power of nature, to the mountain streams of Poland Springs, consumers were successfully persuaded to abandon the tap and buy their own water, though blind taste testing consistently reveals that the public prefers the tap over the bottle (Louaillier 2010). Gleick (2010: xiii) summarizes some of the industry strategies that led to this development:

At times they have subtly and even openly worked to disparage tap water and to sow fear of unseen contamination in it to boost their own sales. They have pressed hard to prevent effective and comprehensive plastic recycling programs.

And they have used the classic advertising and marketing tools of sex, fear, style, and image to drive people toward their product and away from the tap.

Bottles that once contained water (many not redeemable under existing bottle bills) are among the top items rounded up in any river cleanup. In the United States, 80 percent of the bottles end up in landfills or incinerators, or in huge piles in other countries such as India, where they have been shipped and dumped.

Every second in the United States 1,000 plastic bottles of water are sold, and an equal number are thrown away (Gleick 2010). In 2007, 2 billion tons of bottles were sent to landfills annually at a disposal cost of \$70 billion. In the popular online video¹⁰ "The Story of Bottled Water" (2010), Annie Leonard points out that the 30 billion bottles sold each year use enough oil to fuel a million cars. The carbon footprint is increased when bottles are shipped around the world, such as by brands like Fiji Water (Lenzer 2009), and a billion bottles globally are consumed every week. Leonard argues that the consequences of this "manufactured demand," brought about by strategic campaigns of fear, is threatening our "basic human right to clean safe public drinking water." Increasingly water is polluted by industry,¹¹ and investment in municipal water infrastructure is being cut. By 2011, the budget-conscious US House of Representatives spent about a million dollars annually on bottled water, while the nation's public water systems faced a \$24 billion funding gap (Samuelrich 2011). The "Think Outside the Bottle Campaign" by Corporate Accountability International (CAI) successfully opened a dialogue on such funding priorities with its report on congressional water consumption, which led House lawmakers to join over 1,200 cities that have pledged to drink tap water (Samuelrich 2011). The decline in US bottled water sales in the late 2000s has been attributed to the success of CAI's campaign.¹²

Until recently, three decades of the successful commodification of water, a resource whose history is tied to human survival as well as the development of civilization, has proceeded with little discussion (outside of the environmental press and alternative media) of its broader economic significance or its detrimental impact for sustaining life on a warming planet (Lohan 2010). The multiple issues involved in the struggle over bottled water are not immediately evident to consumers who choose to purchase bottled water as the healthy choice, but this product goes to the heart of a vision of global sustainability and economic justice. Once again we find contrasting forces at work, as Gleick (2010: xiii) points out that "the antiglobalization movement, the growing effort to be 'green,' and the newly awakened concern about climate change and its roots cause" are forces that stand in conflict with an industry keen to protect its business interests and continue to market an unsustainable product.

Advertising, as the main buffer between these competing forces, is caught in a continuing cycle of cry and response, forced to manage the public's awareness of the latest environmental crisis wrought by the excesses of overconsumption and the consequences to global ecosystems. Goldman and Papsen observed in 1996 that "green marketing" worked to attach signifiers of sustainable consumption to products; as we have seen, green messaging invests goods with signs that hail environmentally concerned consumers. They found that such messaging legitimates corporate power, but in doing so becomes the site of considerable contestation. Over the years since, corporate crisis management has developed strategies for legitimation including "environmental branding," which includes integrated marketing and other communications techniques complementary to advertising. Such campaigns seek to establish partnerships and

endorsements from various conservation groups. As sources of much needed funding for conservation, they are often successful, but in the process corporations are able to skirt change. In addition, with so many companies establishing green identities while maintaining unsustainable business models, the need for fundamental change in consumption practices and behaviors is lost. Some, usually smaller, organizations refuse to participate in such legitimation, as was the case with the Small Planet Institute, which refused to help promote a green image for Dow Chemical.

Water, Green Internet Campaigns, and Dow Chemical

Dow Chemical's "The Future We Create" campaign features images of clear water in multiple hues of blue. Fish feed on the lush coral reef that makes up the background of the Future of Water Virtual Conference website, part of the campaign. Water activists and organizations are invited to participate:

Join 60 leading thinkers as they explore the future of water for our world today. Covering global systems and specific "megatrends," featuring personal stories from the frontlines as well as reflections on the human dimension of water, The Future of Water will examine how different fields, sectors, and stakeholders can meet the challenge of supplying a growing global population with clean and sustainable water.

(Future of Water 2011)

The message reveals a significant understanding of the complexity of a key environmental topic. Some organizations do jump in and are featured on the website, such as the director of the World Wildlife Fund.

But some do not, notably Anna Lappé of the Small Planet Institute, who was asked to contribute a 60-second videotape to the "virtual conference." Lappé did submit a video, created with the help of the Yes Men Lab, which was rejected by Dow but launched on YouTube, to accompany a website which, like other activist messaging, "jams" the corporate themes by documenting the history and actual environmental impact of Dow Chemical. Dow's state-of-the-art communication strategies are used to deflect lawsuits, government regulation, and criticism from the public interest sector. The website also tells the uncomplimentary history in a time-line ("A Future We Create" 2011).

A company with a troubled past which includes Agent Orange and leaky silicone breast implants, by the 1990s Dow had repeatedly violated an agreement with the State of New York to end its misleading safety claims in print, video, and online ads about its chemical insecticide Dursban. Finally in 2000 the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) phased out approval of the neurotoxin in new home construction, and in 2007 Dow settled with the Securities and Exchange Commission, paying \$325,000, and admitted to bribing officials in India to release chemicals such as Dursban.¹³

In the video rejected by Dow, Lappé details some of the biggest threats to clean water, identifying "contamination of toxic chemicals used in everyday products and sprayed across golf courses, lawns and farm lands." Studies have shown that many are linked to cancers, Parkinson's, and other problems. One chemical is singled out in the video: 2-4D, mixed in with many common lawn care products and linked to canine lymphoma. The coral reef featured on Dow's website is ironically one of the prime coastal

ecosystems most susceptible to damage by the chemicals used to treat golf courses in many places around the world.

The result of such corporate green branding, with its influx of cash, leaves conservation efforts divided, the public misled, and an unsustainable culture of consumption largely intact. In lieu of government bodies willing to establish conservation policies uniformly applied that could limit carbon emissions, or overextraction of resources, or the release of harmful chemicals into ecosystems, environmental groups attempt to pressure companies into green practices. Because of its role in shaping atmospheres of consumption, advertising is often the site of discursive struggle when environmental groups target unsustainable corporate practices. As the commodification of water continues to be a primary site of conservation struggle, the water symbolism legacy of the Crying Indian and the “tear” metaphor he introduced linger as chords of resonance for the environmental public sphere.

A Crying Shame: Kimberly-Clark and the Struggle over Old-Growth Forests

For five years, from 2004 to 2009, Greenpeace with the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) carried out a campaign to pressure Kimberly-Clark to stop clear-cutting old-growth boreal forests in Canada. The North American Boreal Forest is a pristine region and an important sink for capturing carbon dioxide, the main heat-trapping greenhouse gas. It provides habitat for half of North America’s bird species and the world’s largest caribou herds, and is irreplaceable habitat for some endangered species.¹⁴ In 2007 the Kleercut campaign was a nominee for the Benny Awards, given by the Business Ethics Network, a project of Corporate Ethics International. Describing its campaign for the Benny Award judges, Greenpeace said, “Our creative spoofing of a flagship Kimberly-Clark advertisement spawned a buzz on blogs and new media outlets such as YouTube that reach more Kimberly-Clark customers everywhere!” (Business Ethics Network 2011). They had successfully convinced 700 businesses and some universities to boycott Kimberly-Clark’s products, but the ad spoof reached the important online environmental community and took off.

Sometimes humorous, sometimes farcical, but always sentimental, Kimberly-Clark’s ad campaign seemed to set itself up for a hoax. The now infamous blue couch on the streets of New York City became the site where passersby stopped to tell a heartrending personal story and “let it out.” Participants, paid \$200 if their segment was used, were instructed that every story must include tears and end with “I need a Kleenex.” Greenpeace activists impersonating real people told such stories, and then ended with variations of the same message: “But what really makes me want to cry is the way Kimberly-Clark is clear-cutting boreal forests in Canada to make paper products. They use 100 percent virgin old-growth forest to make their tissues. I’m disgusted by the brand Kleenex and I want to let it out” (Kleenex Gets Punk’d! 2007). They mocked the rhetoric and narrative format of Kimberly-Clark’s ad campaign, and also mimicked the Kleenex logo, replacing it with a Kleercut logo on banners made visible while ads were being filmed. According to advertising practitioner Bill Hillsman (2004), the most effective way to counter persuasive messaging is to mimic the target format, visually and textually. This style is now pervasive among culture “jammers” who seek to disrupt the sign connections forged through advertising’s arbitrary associations. Adbusters and the Yes Men Lab are two groups that have created hundreds of “jams” dedicated to

subverting consumer messages called subvertainments or memes, which challenge corporate significations to reveal what promotional imaging conceals.

The Greenpeace ad spoofs and videos, and the criticisms of paper production that they contained, found their way from online environmentalism to a few mainstream newspapers. The *Guardian* reported that Americans' craving for ultra-soft, multi-ply, luxury paper products, especially toilet paper, was worse for the environment than driving Hummers (Goldenberg 2009). In general, US consumers use about three times more per person than the average European, and barely a third of the paper products sold in the United States contain recycled fibers. More than 98 percent of US toilet roll sales are made from virgin wood with longer fibers, the secret to the fluffier, softer tissue. Some of the virgin wood is grown on tree farms, but Kimberly-Clark was using old-growth trees for up to 22 percent of the pulp used in two brands, Cottonelle and Scott (Kaufman 2009). Plush paper products also require more water and chemicals than recycled fibers. Through extensive marketing and ads that featured celebrities using soft paper, the sales of luxury brands with quilted air pockets, some infused with hand-lotion, was booming in 2008, when market share rose by 40 percent. During the third quarter of 2008, Kimberly-Clark spent \$25 million on advertising trying to make the soft sell, but, as the economy worsened by the end of the year, sales dropped 7 percent (Kaufman 2009).

Such market fluctuations, including increases in market share corresponding to advertising,¹⁵ seem to indicate that consumers are not brand driven, but make choices based on a variety of factors, including information. Here we might ask how buying patterns would change if consumers understood where soft paper comes from. Natural Resources Defense Council scientist Allen Hershkowitz posited, "People just don't understand that softness equals ecological destruction" (Goldenberg 2009).¹⁶ As M. J. Jolda, advertising executive for the competing green brand Marcal, put it, "One of the messages we've been trying to get through in the media is that 98% of the industry makes its paper by cutting down trees" (Neff 2010).¹⁷ But, as countless scholars have pointed out, in an era of media conglomeration where advertising pays for media content, few outlets outside of the online environmental or independent press regularly disseminate exposés about corporate practices, or even information about the material resources required to make common household products (see Andersen 2008 for a discussion of commercial pressures upon media content).

Today brand promoters, those pushing unsustainable products and those representing green companies, understand the significance of information in green marketing, and acknowledge the public's interest in conservation. As Jolda noted, "There are a lot of people who feel passionately about cutting down trees. Greenpeace and Kimberly-Clark finally have called a truce, but they're after the consumer brands to change their ways" (Neff 2010).

After five years, Kimberly-Clark signed onto a compromise agreement and reduced the cutting of old-growth forests. Kimberly-Clark stopped buying more than 325,000 tons of pulp a year from logging operations in the Canadian Kenogami and Ogoki forests.¹⁸ But the agreement angered some environmental bloggers, who charged Greenpeace with greenwashing. Writing for the Ecological Internet, Dr. Glen Barry said, "The company traditionally has used 3 million tons of virgin fiber a year, which will fall to 2.4 million tons if they are successful. This atrociously weak target will legitimize continued destruction of Canada's ancient forest ecosystems for throw away paper products for decades" (Barry 2009). Kimberly-Clark's marketing is now the essence of green.

“Green” Consumers: The Vast Majority

As we have seen, advertising and promotional messages that vie for consumer sympathies are often sites of confrontation between corporate and conservation forces. But strategic battles play out against a background of increasingly “green” consumer sentiment. Market research has identified the majority of consumers, about 60 percent, as “light-green.” They want to make environmentally friendly purchases, but they take into account other considerations such as cost. “Dark-green” consumers are those who always try to base their choices on environmental or sustainability factors, and they make up about 15 to 20 percent of the population. These days only a small minority of shoppers are “browns,” those who do not prioritize environmental factors, about 20 percent (Neff 2010). Survey research also shows that “consumers in general want to do good and help the environment but they simply don’t know how.” Misleading “green” advertising makes informed consumer decisions more difficult.

One researcher noted that consumers felt strongly that “everyone should be doing the right thing. They were pushing back and saying that all brands should be green.” Demonstrating a sophisticated insight into a system of economic pricing that does not factor environmental degradation into cost (externalities, as they are called), consumers rightly challenged the idea that earth-friendly products should be more expensive. “If green is so good, brands that are doing harm to the environment should be costing us more and green brands less” (Neff 2010).

But, in the midst of growing consumer interest in conservation and this now decades-long struggle for the life of the planet, corporate practices and messaging, even as they change, seem to stay the same.

Conclusion

Over the last half-century, since the Crying Indian was conceived and debuted, consumer culture and the attendant environmental destruction caused by overconsumption have expanded at an alarming pace. In the last five decades per capita consumption has nearly tripled. The \$9.7 trillion spent per year in the United States accounts for 32 percent of total global spending, done by only 5 percent of the world’s population (Assadourian 2010). If everyone on the globe lived like Americans, the earth could support only 1.4 billion people. Current consumption patterns make extravagant demands of the earth’s ability to provide resources such as trees, metals, fuel, land, and water. As World Watch Institute (Assadourian 2010: 4) documents, “Between 1950 and 2005, metals production grew sixfold, oil consumption eightfold, and natural gas 14-fold. In total, 60 billion tons of resources are now extracted annually—about 50 percent more than thirty years ago.”

Currently humans are using about a third more of the earth’s capacity than is available. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Board (2005: 5) warned: “human activity is putting such a strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet’s ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted.” Most disturbing is the loss of the planet’s ability to regulate climate.¹⁹ Other symptoms of excessive consumption are the loss of forests, soil erosion, water and air pollution, and the production of over 100 million tons of toxic waste every year. In addition, as Rogers (2005) argues, over the last 30 years, even in the midst of “green” consciousness and recycling rhetoric, our mountains of garbage have doubled. She traces the development

of this waste stream to the post-war industrial practices of planned obsolescence and a throwaway culture, the same practices that gave birth to the Crying Indian.

Advertising visions of virtual nature in harmony with consumption hide the destruction of the environment. Even advertisements that feature greener technologies often deny the need for change. Take for example a Prius ad that shows the vehicle driving through a lush, colorful landscape of flowers, trees, and clouds. On close inspection every feature of the natural world is composed of the human form. The flowers are people in green leotards with huge petals around their necks, a butterfly is human with wings, and the legs of people dressed in white dangle from the sky to form clouds. The ad ends with “It’s harmony between man, nature and machine.” Though utopian in feel, this troubling scenario replaces the earth’s diverse biomass with one dominating species—*homo sapiens*—and reveals a persistent, unsustainable attitude toward nature. As Cormac Cullinan (2010: 144) argues, “Humans are, of course, but one of many species that have co-evolved within a system they are wholly dependent on. In the long term humans cannot thrive in a degraded environment anymore than fish can survive in polluted water.” Cullinan and others propose a fundamental shift in the framework of conservation, one that replaces a human-centric global with an “Earth community” where humans can no longer dominate, or replace, all other members of the community that sustains them. The attitude that the earth is simply a store of natural resources for humans to consume is no longer viable.

When consumers are made aware of the environmental destruction caused by a disposable culture such as the huge ocean gyres of revolving plastic, they are eager to find solutions (Ocean Conservancy 2009). The proliferation of misleading green persuasions making false claims about corporate visions serve to disconnect the public from the actual solutions to environmental degradation. Though significant gains are continually made by targeted conservation efforts, commercial discourse and corporate PR strategies succeed in preventing fundamental awareness of the destructive consequences of overconsumption. If the considerable creative and financial resources that constitute the world of advertising are to play a positive role in the life of the planet, they will promote corporate transformations only if companies have made a commitment to change, whether through pressure from conservation organizations or through legislation that would require carbon emission reductions, uniform fuel efficiency standards, bottle redemption bills, and the global protection of the Earth community. Until then, advertising will continue to perpetuate myths of good corporate citizenship in the midst of devastating global ecosystem destruction.

Notes

Research assistance for the writing of this chapter was given by Kelly Caggiano and Kimberly Ogonosky.

- 1 For an interesting history of the evolution of Earth Day see <http://environment.about.com/od/environmentalevents/a/twoearthdays.htm>.
- 2 Krech goes on to engage the topic of “Pleistocene overkill,” which asserts that the first inhabitants of the new world who walked across the land-bridge of the Bering Strait 14,000 years ago hunted the ice-age mammals to extinction in North America. Forty genera of species including mammoths, mastodons, camels, and horses, among many others, were wiped out in a cascade of loss. To date there is increasing evidence for this assertion, and less for the earlier, more conventional assumption that the catastrophic event was caused by climate change.
- 3 KAB’s Crying Indian was so successful that it is studied as a model for public information campaigns designed to change behavior. See Gerteis, Hodges, and Mulligan (2008).

- 4 Available online at http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=fKeep_America_Beautiful.
- 5 Burson-Marsteller specializes in crisis management for clients involved in some of the world’s worst environmental disasters, including Union Carbide after the Bhopal disaster in 1984, and Babcock & Wilcox, reactor builders, after the accident at Three Mile Island in 1979.
- 6 KAB remains a legitimate “green” organization in the eyes of the public. In one survey, respondents chose KAB as “more believable” than Nature Conservancy, the Sierra Club, and Greenpeace (Stand 2008).
- 7 The main change to the beverage is the replacement of high-fructose corn syrup with sugar, and the elimination of two chemical enhancers (Tanner 2010).
- 8 For an excellent exploration into the research and development of fast food at PepsiCo, see Seabrook (2011). For an analysis of the ways in which fast food creates cravings and habitual consumption see Nestle (2002).
- 9 In February 2011 the Associated Press reported that environmental groups and local residents charge the plant in Palakkad district with contaminating groundwater and causing severe water shortages. The plant was shut down in 2004, though Coke denied the charge.
- 10 For an excellent discussion of the opportunities of today’s social media and their potential for sustainable storytelling see Sachs and Finkelpearl (2010).
- 11 For a long-form exploration of the environmental destruction caused by fracking, see the documentary *Gasland*.
- 12 Environmental News Network, “Bottled Water Demand May Be Declining,” September 8, 2008, <http://www.enn.com/pollution/article/38116>.
- 13 Other lawsuits are pending, notably one brought by Greenpeace for spying on the organization, and another by community members in Texas for draining toxic fluids from trucks at Dow’s former facility. At Dow global headquarters in Michigan, the EPA and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality found dioxin levels more than a thousand times higher than the standard.
- 14 The Canadian Boreal Forest is North America’s largest old-growth forest, and contains 25 percent of the world’s remaining intact ancient forests. It provides habitat for threatened wildlife such as woodland caribou and a sanctuary for more than 1 billion migratory birds. It is also the largest terrestrial storehouse of carbon on the planet, storing the equivalent of 27 years’ worth of global greenhouse gas emissions (Natural Resources Canada 2009). For the National Resources Defense Council Background Paper, see Natural Resources Defense Council (2005).
- 15 Consider the case of Marcal, a green paper company in operation for over 50 years that went bankrupt in 2008. The company was bought by a private firm, and veteran marketing personnel redesigned the packaging and promotion with a \$30 million marketing campaign. The “green without compromise” campaign included TV, print, coupon, and other marketing support, techniques the company had never done before. A year later sales were up by 15 percent and retail distribution went from 40 percent to 50 percent of the market (Neff 2010).
- 16 One of the resources that came from the Kleercut campaign was a buyer’s guide to paper products, which rated recycled content and environmental impact (Greenpeace USA 2011).
- 17 Increasingly, green companies benefit from information and often include manufacturing details on their packaging. Marcal added an “environmental facts” panel on their packaging, stating the paper is 100 percent recycled and uses no chlorine bleach or dyes.
- 18 The announcement stated: “Implementation of the policy will lead to protection of the world’s most endangered forests, increased support for sustainable forest management through Forest Stewardship Council certification and the increased use of recycled fiber in Kimberly-Clark products” (Kleercut 2009).
- 19 See for example Hansen (2009). For sources that document the role of the public relations industry in climate change denial see Oreskes and Conway (2010) and Hoggan (2009).

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