

## Greenwashing in the Travel and Tourism Industry

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Ever since "greenwashing" officially entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 1999, the definition of "disinformation

that is disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image" has an instantly recognizable term. There is no question that the ominous presence of this "bête verte" is increasingly problematic to businesses and regulators, while NGO's and consumer protection groups navigate through a maze of hazy green claims in products and services.

Much of the greenwashing accusations or "sins", as creatively articulated by TerraChoice's ["The Sins of Greenwashing"](#), have been focused on consumer household and personal use products. However, there has been no shortage of eco-criticism for the highly fragmented and mostly unregulated **global travel and tourism industry**. The majority of travel businesses are small and medium size enterprises, but collectively they are energy, carbon, water and waste intensive, while mass tourism is highly disruptive to the natural environment. In an

industry with eight main sectors and approximately twenty eight subsectors, it is not difficult to make environmental claims that are light on accuracy yet can neither be easily substantiated nor discredited. While the perpetrators may generally be well intentioned but uninformed tourism operators, large publically traded companies like EasyJet from the UK have also been reprimanded for misleading advertising.



The causes for greenwashing in travel are no different than in other sectors. Businesses run the risk of falling into the greenwash trap while attempting to increase sales to create differentiation in a highly commoditized travel market with an increasingly desegregated supply chain; when it seeks to enhance its reputation by demonstrating environmental stewardship for both its operations at home and in destinations;

when a top down mandated approach for risk management fails to embed sustainability in the organizational culture; or when enthusiastic grassroots bottom-up initiatives hurry environmental programs without proper capacity building or communication strategy. The greenwashing fallout ranges from the erosion of public trust of tourism eco-labels, to reputational damage both at the enterprise level and whole sectors like hotels, airlines, cruises and car rentals.

In the recent workshop I did for the 2011 Sustainable Tourism Conference in Bermuda organized by the [Caribbean Tourism Organization](#), I played with the idea of TerraChoice's "Seven Sins" for the travel industry. The audience had fun thinking of examples of green infractions in destinations, transportation and accommodation. Here are a few examples of the "green travelling sins":

**1. The hidden trade-off** - A claim suggesting that a product is 'green' based on a narrow set of attributes without attention to other important environmental issues.

A hotel states that it uses solar panels for water heating, but the property has no water conservation program. They are therefore, depleting the communities' water table making the tourism operation unsustainable in the long-term.

**2. No proof** - An environmental claim that cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or by a reliable third-party certification.

Many restaurants and hotels claim to serve organic food. However, they don't state from where it is sourced. They may also claim that towel re-use is good for the environment, but they seldom provide evidence of how this

is measured, especially if housekeeping changes them daily anyway!

**3. Vagueness**- A claim that is so poorly defined or broad that its real meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the consumer.

Tourism is about connecting people to beautiful places and it is mostly centered on nature, history and culture. To promote these locales, claims are often made about them being natural, pristine, and well-preserved. It does not mean however, that these areas are being protected or initiatives are being implemented to mitigate the impact of high tourism volume.



**4. Worshiping false labels** - A product that, through either words or images, gives the impression of third-party endorsement where no such endorsement exists (fake labels).

There are hundreds of global tourism eco-labels, certifications, accreditations, guidelines and codes of ethics that are adopted by destinations, hotels, transportation and attractions. The lack of an easily recognized certification such as [Fair Trade](#) can lead to the impression that the tourism product is certified "green" when no

proper information is provided as to how it is achieved and audited.

**5. Irrelevance** - *An environmental claim that may be truthful but is unimportant or unhelpful for consumers seeking environmentally preferable products.*

Mega cruise ships spend a lot of time and money to collect recyclable plastic, paper and glass, but since they are unable to store it in the vessel, they often unload this cargo in ports with no recycling facilities where the waste ends up in a landfill. Although there are programs to build recycling facilities in the ports of call, if the final destination of the recycled material is not stated, it may give a false impression that the cruise ship has fully reduced its waste impact.

**6. Lesser of two evils:** *A claim that may be true within the product category, but that risks distracting the consumer from the greater environmental impacts of the category as a whole.*

What emits less carbon, a car, a train or a plane? [According to EasyJet's ads](#), their planes! Apparently the assumptions used to make these claims were erroneous and EasyJet was reprimanded by the UK Advertising Standard Agency for false advertising. Bottom line is that all of these forms of transports are powered by non-renewable energy and it ultimately comes down to relative choices about which option is less harmful to the environment.

**7. Fibbing:** *Environmental claims that are simply false.*

According to TerraChoice this is the least committed sin. The delegates sincerely wanted to believe that no tourism business would willfully mislead the public. Then we

thought that the process of trying to prove a lie is so time consuming and costly that we may never know anyway.

Although there was no naming and shaming of travel companies, the delegates expressed a great deal of frustration at how complex it is to communicate sustainability. Some tourism businesses may be reluctant to share their environmental initiatives with their stakeholders — they fear being accused of greenwashing. As interest in sustainability increases, businesses must take the lead to ensure the accuracy and verifiability of their environmental claims. In an age of TripAdvisor and countless consumer travel websites, tourism is now fully “exposed to the elements”, so to speak!

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