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## Seeing red over greenwashing

By Paula Arab

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When the esteemed primatologist Jane Goodall visited the Herald editorial board last week, she had but one wish for the world, to turn us all into conscientious shoppers.

"I would like to see everybody spend a little bit of time, thinking about the consequences of the little choices they make everyday. What we buy, what we eat, what we wear," said Goodall, who spends 300 days a year on speaking tours, advocating the need for conservation.

The soft-spoken conservationist brought Calgary a message of hope, that one person can indeed make a difference.

Those of us in the newsroom were briefly uplifted. Then the "hopelessness" of saving our planet came flooding back, in a new report that revealed there are many shades of green when it comes to environmental product claims.

Ottawa-based TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. tested consumer products against their green claims, and found 95 per cent stretched the truth. They committed what TerraChoice has dubbed "greenwashing." A full 100 per cent of toys claiming to be environmentally friendly failed the

TerraChoice test, and only six of 706 baby products passed.

The easy reaction to such results might be consumer apathy. Why bother with ecoshopping? If minimizing our negative impact in the world were to be taken to the extreme, the logical outcome would eventually lead most of us to bury our heads in the oilsands or hide indoors indefinitely, trying not to breathe.

Such a reaction is a mistake. Evidence of greenwashing requires red – as in getting angry.

Most of us can agree on common standards such as the need to provide safe and dignified conditions for workers. (Think Nike Inc., once a symbol of sweatshop labour that under public pressure became a model for its efforts to improve factory conditions in developing countries.)

The Rough Guide to Shopping with a Conscience, by Duncan Clark and Richie Unterberger, says the argument "against the 'moralization' of consumerism" is a distraction from the real issues. The authors write that "no consumer, let alone a producer or product, can be truly, 100 per cent, categorically ethical" and that this line of thought is often given as a reason for "not

bothering with ethically minded shopping . . .

"That said, it's true that you should treat ethical claims with a certain degree of caution until you know exactly what it is they refer to, especially when someone's trying to make money out of them."

The TerraChoice report, which has conducted its Sins of Greenwashing study for the past three years, is a good place to start educating oneself on the common ways green labels attempt to trick consumers.

Among the greenwashing "sins" to watch out for are those which ignore the hidden trade-offs of products; trade-off that can be worse for the environment than the claimed benefit. A product might come from a sustainable source, but how was it made? How much energy did it take to manufacture or produce? What was the air or water pollution involved in the process?

Beware of products that use vague buzz words in their claims, such as "all natural." Chemicals such as uranium, mercury and arsenic are all naturally occurring, but are actually poisonous.

Another sin is that of irrelevance. Those that claim to be CFC or chlorofluorocarbons-free are likely telling the truth, but what they're not saying is that these chemicals were banned in Canada years ago, because they were found to deplete the ozone layer.

There's the sin of no proof, which is when a claim can't be substantiated with easily accessible evidence, or a reliable third-party certification. And there are outright lies, such as products that falsely claim to be Energy Star qualified when they are not.

Consumers should familiarize themselves with Environment Canada's EcoLogo initiative, managed by TerraChoice, and designed to help make it easier for shoppers to make environmentally conscious decisions.

Jane Goodall says conscious choices can't be made unless people understand the consequences of their actions. "So it means learning more about it. How our food is grown, where it comes from? How our clothes are made, did they involve child slave labour, were animals tortured? Did it destroy rainforest to grow grain? All of these little things."

It's those "little things" that will eventually lead to mandatory eco-labelling, better standards, and relevant change.

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