

10 MYTHS ABOUT...

GREENWASHING

**Sorting facts
from fiction.**

Is the transition towards clean renewable energy taking place quick enough to overturn our reliance on fossil fuels by 2050? Do green labels always mean what they say?

Explore 10 common myths about the buzzwords, marketing tactics and green credentials of businesses or governments in practice.

INTRODUCTION

We are in the middle of a climate crisis - the sixth major extinction event Earth has seen - and the first caused by humans. We are not doing enough to address climate change. Ahead of COP28 in November 2023, World Meteorological Organization Secretary-General Prof. Petteri Taalas said:



“Greenhouse gas levels are record high. Global temperatures are record high. Sea level rise is record high. Antarctic sea ice is record low. It’s a deafening cacophony of broken records.”

The human impact of these changes is already staggering, and it will only continue to get worse until we drastically reduce emissions worldwide. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) found in November 2023 that under the current pledges laid out by the Paris Agreement, the world is on track for a 2.5-2.9°C temperature rise above pre-industrial levels this century. This is far above the 1.5°C limit that would avoid the worst impacts of climate change. What is even more concerning is that the vast majority of countries, and none of the G20 countries, are actually on course to meet even their current targets, which clearly are not ambitious enough.

Practices such as ‘greenwashing’ threaten to derail any significant progress.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines greenwashing as:

“the act or practice of making a product, policy, activity, etc. appear to be more environmentally friendly or less environmentally damaging than it really is.”

It is a practice used worldwide by governments, companies and even individuals. It is hugely damaging the fight against climate change. Greenwashing is based upon deception, manipulation and trickery, and must be called out and challenged at every available opportunity. It is a deliberate tactic that uses people’s ‘green’ intentions against them and only makes the problems consumers are trying to solve more difficult.

Ultimately, it is those with the least who will suffer the most. Already, many small island nations, such as Tuvalu, are seeing their countries disappear as sea levels rise. Bangladesh has seen unprecedented floods, while Malawi has been hit by cyclone after cyclone. It is those in the Global South who are paying, often with their homes, livelihoods and lives changes for our emissions in the Global North. Supporting the most vulnerable is not about charity, it is about justice.

Meanwhile, at COP28, UK newspaper The Guardian reported that there were at least 2,456 fossil fuel lobbyists in attendance. That is more than all the delegates from the 10 most climate-vulnerable countries combined. Fossil fuel companies have been greenwashing for decades, all in an attempt to benefit profit margins, not people.

The 2015 Paris Agreement was a milestone in the climate movement, but it was merely an important first step, not a destination. Consensus has only grown in recent years that climate change is caused by humans, and we must phase out fossil fuels. Of course, there are still those who question this, but we are at a point where there is more consensus than ever before.

This unity is essential. Regardless of gender, race, political beliefs, or otherwise, climate change will affect us all. Therefore, unity amongst the governments, businesses and people of the world is not up for negotiation; it is the only way we can avert a climate catastrophe.

‘Greenwashers’ threaten this unity, and the first step we can take to fight back against greenwashing is to educate ourselves, and bust the most common myths associated with the practice.

For more

- 2023 shatters climate records, with major impacts (30 November 2023), press release by The World Meteorological Organization <https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/2023-shatters-climate-records-major-impacts>
- Emissions Gap Report 2023 by the United Nations Environment Programme <https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2023>

WHY THINKING ABOUT GREENWASHING MATTERS

- 1. We don't have time for greenwashing.** The climate crisis has already arrived, and we are all affected by climate change, no matter where we are from or where we live.
- 2. Greenwashing undermines credible efforts to reduce emissions** and address the climate crisis. Climate sceptics and conspiracy theorists can use false and token green actions as proof of deceit by governments or companies. Greenwashing gives an excuse to bad faith actors to undermine all green actions, regardless of their intentions.
- 3. Businesses, governments and leaders of all kinds must be held accountable for actions which will make the climate crisis worse.** This will - and already is - killing people, displacing families and destroying lives. Accountability matters, or else bad-faith actors will not change their behaviour.
- 4. Greenwashing feeds into a broader culture of misinformation and lack of trust that has grown in recent years.** This kind of culture can then be used by trolls-for-hire (and some governments) to undermine democracy, create division and discriminate between groups using selective facts and ignoring the wider picture. Creating a more sustainable world begins with supporting, championing and widening opportunities for greener practices.
- 5. The most vulnerable will suffer the most.** Already, those from the most vulnerable communities in the Global South are at the forefront of the climate crisis, while the vast majority of emissions come from the Global North. This is about justice, not charity.



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

GOALS

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including those relating to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental decline, prosperity, and peace and justice. To leave no one behind, it is important that we achieve each Goal and target by 2030.

Climate Action (Goal 13) deals specifically with climate change, but many other goals also deal with climate change and its wide array of broader impacts on society. For example, **Zero Hunger (Goal 2)**, **Affordable and Clean Energy (Goal 7)**, and **Responsible Consumption and Production (Goal 12)** all have a significant climate dimension to them.



[MYTH 01]

**PRODUCTS LABELLED
'GREEN' OR 'NATURAL'
ARE INHERENTLY
BENEFICIAL TO THE
PLANET**

[FICTION]

While products labelled as ‘green’, ‘sustainable’, ‘natural’ or ‘conscious’ may be environmentally friendly choices, these words alone do not guarantee that this is true. Many companies use these words purely as a marketing tool without any evidence to support their claims.

The fashion industry is notorious for its environmental impact; most notably clothing giants, such as H&M, Shein and BooHoo among many other fast fashion brands.

In 2021, Changing Markets Foundation found that 59% of sustainability claims made by high-street fashion brands were misleading. Meanwhile, it was found that as much as 96% of sustainability claims made by H&M were misleading.

An example of this was H&M’s ‘environmental scorecards’, intending to highlight the sustainability of their garments. More than 50% of the scorecards showed that a garment was better for the environment than average high-street clothes. In reality, they were found to be no more sustainable than similar garments made by H&M and other fast fashion competitors. These included garments which are part of their green-labelled ‘H&M Conscious’ range.

Following backlash, H&M withdrew their environmental scorecards, but continue to use words like ‘conscious’ and ‘sustainable’ without any meaningful evidence to substantiate their claims.

Source:

Synthetics Anonymous (2021) by Changing Markets Foundation. Link: https://changingmarkets.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/SyntheticsAnonymous_FinalWeb.pdf

Quartz investigation: H&M showed bogus environmental scores for its clothing (2022), Quartz. Link: <https://qz.com/2180075/hm-showed-bogus-environmental-higg-index-scores-for-its-clothing>

[MYTH 02]

GREENER PRODUCTS ARE TOO EXPENSIVE

A MIX OF... [FACT & FICTION]

Environmentally-friendly products are often more expensive than their non-sustainable counterparts. However, this is changing as consumer demand for 'greener' products continues to increase year-on-year and technology continues to improve. This allows these products to be made more efficiently.

While the upfront cost of these products may be higher, they tend to last longer than less sustainable products, which is more cost-effective long-term.

For example:

- LED lightbulbs are about €2 more expensive than a regular bulb. Switching to energy efficient light bulbs leads to an 80% reduction in lighting costs (saving €7 per year, per lightbulb). A regular bulb lasts about 2,000 hours, while an LED bulb lasts approximately 20,000 hours (source: Electric Ireland)
- Beeswax wraps: While many of us use cling film or tin foil to wrap food, beeswax wraps are a sustainable, reusable alternative. While cling film costs around €2, a pack of beeswax wraps costs about €16, but last for many years.
- Solar panels: While there is a large initial cost, it is estimated that most households will make this back in savings to electricity bills in 7 to 10 years. After this period, there is constant savings on electricity for a lifetime.

[MYTH 03]

**TALKING ABOUT
THE ENVIRONMENT
MEANS THERE MUST
BE GREEN POLICIES TO
BACK THIS UP**

[FICTION]

Many governments and companies use green-tinged language. While it is important for climate issues to be mainstreamed in all political and business discussions, without action and accountability, it is just words.

In 2018 Taoiseach Leo Varadkar spoke of transforming Ireland from a 'laggard to a leader' on climate change and has frequently used this phrase in the years since. However:

- Ireland had the second worst greenhouse gas emissions per person in the EU in 2020, according to the Central Statistics Office
- In the second quarter of 2023, Ireland was one of six EU countries which saw their emissions increase and dropped six places in the 2023 Climate Change Performance Index to 43rd globally (as reported by Eurostat and ccpi.org)

In November 2023 at COP28, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak claimed that the UK is 'leading the charge' on the climate crisis. Yet two months prior to this claim in September 2023, seven new oil and gas projects in the North Sea were approved by the UK government.

To have a real impact, governments and companies must move past voluntary mechanisms. Without legally binding targets and progress reviews that have tangible economic consequences if targets are not met, nothing will change.

[MYTH 04]

CARBON OFFSETTING CANCELS OUT CARBON EMISSIONS

DEFINING CARBON OFFSETTING

Carbon offsetting aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in one place, in order to compensate for emissions produced elsewhere. This is often done in the form of tree planting. For example, if a factory produces 100,000 metric tonnes of CO₂ per year, but also gives money to plant trees that will capture the same amount, the factory's emissions are 'offset' against the trees, and this factory can now say it is 'carbon neutral'.

[FICTION]

...BUT THERE'S MORE

Despite a business or a person's **best intentions**, carbon offsetting is not reducing their emissions, but paying others to reduce theirs.

While most climate scientists agree that while they are potentially beneficial, carbon offsets are relatively useless without also significantly cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

Director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Johan Rockström, wrote in The Guardian that offsetting can help us stay below 1.5° C of global warming, but only if carbon emissions are also cut by at least 50% each decade from now until 2050:

“Carbon offsetting is important but can only be an *additionality* – we need to get off fossil fuels, and do carbon offsets.”

Professor of global change science at UCL, Simon Lewis, believes the problem lies with the lack of regulation.

“We want there to be more *good credits* that are really beneficial, and less *scam credits*. The problem with the carbon markets is that they're a *wild west*, they're unregulated.”

Investigations in January 2023 by The Guardian, Die Zeit and SourceMaterial into Verra, the world's leading offset certifier used by brands such as Disney, Shell and Gucci, found that at least 90% of Verra's rainforest offset credits are actually 'phantom credits' and do not represent real emissions reductions.

[MYTH 05]

‘RECYCLABLE’ MEANS THAT THE ITEM WILL BE RECYCLED

A NOTE ON ‘RECYCLING CODES’

Recycling codes are used to identify the materials out of which the item is made, to facilitate easier recycling process. In many countries, including Ireland, plastic packaging is required to have triangles of arrows with a number in the middle, between one and seven.

These are all technically ‘recyclable’, but this is misleading. Triangles marked as one or two are likely to be recycled but those marked three to seven are far less likely to be recycled. US-based campaign group, the Plastic Pollution Coalition, are calling for governments and companies to ‘turn off the plastic tap’.

Source: <https://www.plasticpollutioncoalition.org>

[FICTION]

Many companies market their products as ‘recyclable’, despite being aware that the packaging waste will actually not be recycled. It would be more effective if the focus was on producing less waste in the first place, rather than producing it and then attempting to find a solution to deal with it.

In the EU, just 64% of packaging waste is recycled, and just 39.7% of plastic packaging. In Ireland, these numbers are just 58.1% and 29.1% respectively. In the United States, these figures are even lower; 32% of all packaging waste is recycled and just 6% of plastic waste (Source: Eurostat and Greenpeace USA).

There are numerous reasons for this, such as plastic waste being notoriously difficult to recycle, a lack of recycling facilities in communities, a lack of demand for recycled goods, and as Darby Hoover, a recycling expert at the US Natural Resources Defense Council, calls it, ‘wish-cycling,’



“One of the biggest problems is called ‘wish-cycling, where we wish something could be recycled so we put it in the recycling bin and cross our fingers.”

Since plastics were first manufactured on a large scale in the 1950s, just 9% of plastics have been recycled.

[MYTH 06]

**COMPANIES THAT
DONATE TO
ENVIRONMENTAL
CAUSES MUST CARE
ABOUT THE CLIMATE
CRISIS**

[FICTION]

Donations to environmental causes are important and should be encouraged. However, there's no guarantee that those who donate are doing it for the right reasons. Companies often use donations to 'greenwash' or as a means of trying to influence independent institutions.

Between 2010 and 2020, think tank Data for Progress found that fossil fuel companies gave 27 of the most eminent American universities, including Harvard and MIT, a combined total of \$677,373,368 to carry out climate change 'research'. Meanwhile, fossil fuel use remains responsible for 89% of greenhouse gas emissions globally.

Journalists Damian Carrington and Matthew Taylor found in May 2022 that the same fossil fuel companies "are on track to spend \$103m a day for the rest of the decade exploiting new fields of oil and gas that cannot be burned if global heating is to be limited to well under 2° C."

And yet some companies donate generously to environmental causes because they care about the environment, such as outdoor clothing brand Patagonia. For decades, the company gave 1% of profits to charities and grassroots environmental activists. In 2022, after 50 years, founder Yvon Chouinard donated the entire \$3 billion dollar company to a designed trust to donate the company's excess profits to combat climate change, approximately \$100 million a year.

[MYTH 08]

AMAZON HAVE GREEN POLICIES AND INVEST IN GREEN PROJECTS, SO THEY MUST BE A SUSTAINABLE COMPANY WHO CARE ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

[FICTION]

Amazon publishes data about their emissions annually along with their sustainability report and launched a 'Climate Pledge' in 2019 to achieve net zero by 2040, 10 years ahead of the Paris Agreement. The Climate Pledge was met with a \$2 billion venture capital investment fund to support low carbon technologies. It is ambitious, and should be welcomed.

However, their record requires taking a closer look:

- A 0.4% decrease in emissions in 2022 is incredibly low considering their carbon emissions actually increased by 40% between 2019 and 2021.
- Their plan to achieve net-zero includes offsetting emissions against tree planting initiatives. This is controversial and deeply flawed. NewClimate policy analyst Silke Mooldijk explains: "Nature-based solutions have a low likelihood of permanence. Trees may be cut down or lost in forest fires, which means that stored CO₂ will be released into the atmosphere again."
- Amazon have lobbied successfully to quash climate bills, removed their 'Shipment Zero' target that committed to making 50% of Amazon shipments net-zero by 2030 and used 'creative carbon accounting' to massively understate their emissions. Amazon only includes the manufacture of "Amazon-branded product manufacturing, such as Echo devices, Kindles e-readers, Amazon Basics, Whole Foods Market brands, and other Amazon Private Brands products", with these products accounting for 1% of Amazon's total sales.

[MYTH 09]

TECHNOLOGY IS THE ANSWER

A MIX OF... [FACT & FICTION]

New technologies are undoubtedly crucial for tackling the climate crisis. Yet they come with their own challenges and without drastic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, they have limited impact.

Petrol and diesel passenger cars are responsible for 11.6% of global carbon dioxide emissions. **Electric vehicles** (EVs), by contrast, have zero tailpipe emissions and are key to tackling both climate change and poor air quality.

However, there are serious issues with regard to battery production and disposal. 11 million tonnes of lithium-ion batteries are forecast to be discarded by 2030. The production of electric vehicle batteries currently rely on **mining rare earth metals**, including lithium, nickel, manganese, and cobalt, which frequently use slave or child labour.

Furthermore, energy that powers EVs are typically drawn from national energy grids, which still largely rely on fossil fuels.

Carbon capture and storage is another emerging technology often touted as ‘the solution’. No single thing can be ‘the solution’ to a crisis as multifaceted as the climate crisis. It can be vital in tackling environmental issues, but it is not viable on a large scale yet and fails to address other climate-related issues such as deforestation and biodiversity loss.

While **technology** will be crucial to tackle the climate crisis, a fossil fuel phase out is also essential, as is **ensuring** that technological advancements **do not come at the cost of human rights**.

[MYTH 10]

**THE ACTIONS OF
INDIVIDUALS MAKE
LITTLE DIFFERENCE TO
GREENWASHING**

[FICTION]

In such turbulent times, it's easy to feel hopeless. However, when it comes to greenwashing, individuals can challenge this head on.

Collective boycotts have proven again and again to be successful in driving change. Boycotting companies that greenwash and encouraging friends and family to do the same, is one simple way to stand up to greenwashing. For example:

- PETA led a successful boycott of House of Fraser from 2020-2023 over its sale of fur, which ended with House of Fraser banning the sale of fur across all its brands.
- The boycott of jewellery maker Harry Winston by the International Campaign for the Rohingya, ended with the company announcing, 'In its ongoing commitment to responsible and ethical sourcing, the House of Harry Winston will no longer source gemstones from its suppliers that have Burmese origins, regardless of their importation dates.' The company received a petition with over 25,000 signatures demanding the company cut ties with Burmese gemstones on the same day. This boycott was due to the Myanmar military profiting from these deals and the military committing violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law against the Rohingya people.
- Since 2021, over 40 organisations across Europe led a citizens initiative and petition calling for a new law that bans fossil fuel advertising and sponsorship in the European Union. By January 2024 and 353,103 signatures later, an EU directive was passed to tackle greenwashing by prohibiting false environmental claims and to consumers from misleading marketing practices. In the US more than 500 PR and marketing agencies signed a Clean Creatives pledge, for agencies that want to swear off working with fossil fuel clients in the future.

And lastly... think you're alone? Think again. A 2023 UK survey by KPMG found that more than half of shoppers are prepared to boycott greenwashing companies from a brand found to be making misleading environmental claims.

GLOSSARY

Biodegradable materials are able to decay naturally (through the action of living organisms) and in a way that is not harmful.

Carbon capture and storage (CCS) is a process for trapping carbon dioxide (CO₂), a potent greenhouse gas, and sequestering it, typically deep underground.

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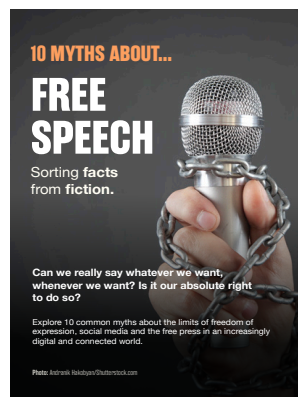
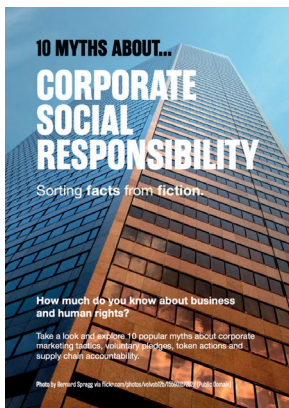
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