

# Greenwashing Offenders

Here are some of the most flagrant examples of greenwashing. They're tricky, deceptive, and, at the very best, nothing more than a collection of half-truths.

## GREENWASHING & BIG OIL

### BRITISH PETROLEUM (BP P.L.C.)

In December 2019, environmental legal charity "[Client Earth](#)" launched a complaint against [BP](#) over claims of greenwashing. BP is accused of misleading consumers, giving them a false impression of their environmental record, with a recent BP advertising campaign adopted an environmental focus and promoted its proposed low-carbon energy initiatives. Another is the fossil fuel giant BP, who changed their name to Beyond Petroleum and put solar panels on their gas stations, and then [came under fire for their green misdirection](#).

In its *Keep Advancing* and *Possibilities Everywhere* campaigns, BP acknowledges the need to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

However the energy sector is one of the largest contributors to global greenhouse gas emissions, there are calls for the sector to de-carbonize and thereby reduce its impact on the warming climate. There is a considerable challenge to be faced in switching our energy supply from one that is fossil fuel based to one that is significantly less carbon-intense. BP claim to be leading the way.

Client Earth lawyers contest the claims made in BP's advertising campaign regarding their commitment to low-carbon and renewable energy. Whilst BP advertise a keen focus on investing in environment-friendly energy, the fact remains that [96% of their annual capital expenditure is spent on non-renewable oil and gas](#). Going by their own figures, BP is investing \$500 million a year in low-carbon initiatives, less than 4% of overall investment.

British Petroleum's first move to becoming "green" started in 1997 when it quit the industry's climate change denial group and acknowledged a link between global warming and fossil fuels. By 2000, the company hired advertising firm [Ogilvy & Mathers](#) to launch a \$200 million rebranding campaign.

The firm rebranded the name British Petroleum to BP and adopted a new slogan: “Beyond Petroleum.” The firm also changed its brand image into a green, yellow, and white sunburst that is meant to depict a “warm and fuzzy feeling” about the Earth. BP also greenwashed itself by working with green groups and decorating its gas stations with “green” images.

Despite British Petroleum’s attempt to greenwash, the company remains an oil company that derives its revenues from polluting the air and destroying the planet. Through many controversial oil spills over the past two decades, such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, British Petroleum’s attempt to greenwash itself has died down.

#### ROYAL DUTCH SHELL

Similarly to BP, in April 2019 [Shell announced a \\$300 million investment in “natural ecosystems”](#) as part of a strategy to take action against climate change.

Some funds now go towards projects that protect trees and others invest in carbon credits. Activities such as these are known as climate change mitigation strategies. In essence, they help to reduce the adverse effects of climate change by reducing the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

As with BP, by continuing the extraction of fossil fuels from the ground (and the subsequent burning of those fuels), Shell contradict the very mitigation efforts they promote.

Whilst assisting in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions that already exist within our atmosphere may have some positive effect, the [IPCC asserts](#) that “natural climate solutions do not compensate for the continued release of greenhouse gases.”

Despite committing themselves to oil and gas, Shell continue to [promote themselves as an energy provider that is uses “100% renewable electricity](#) as standard.” This claim is questionable as in 2018 [Shell invested \\$25bn in non-renewable oil and gas](#) energy sources.

According to the [Natural Resources Defense Council’s \(NRDC\) definition](#), renewable energy is, that which “comes from natural sources or processes that are constantly replenished.” However, Shell’s claim of a [100% renewable source only stands in virtue of purchasing green offsetting certificates](#), not through buying directly from renewable energy sources. Energy companies can

remain investing in non-renewable sources and [merely buy enough green certificates to match](#) this investment.

Investing in “natural climate solutions” and purchasing green certificates promote the idea of Shell as an environmentally responsible company. However, Shell significantly lacks direct investment in renewable energy while the green initiatives it does engage with have no significant impact. Given that the majority of investment is still being pumped into the fossil fuel industry, it can be argued that this is an act of greenwashing.

## GREENWASHING & TRANSPORTATION

### RYANAIR

In February 2020, a [Ryanair](#) advert was banned by a UK watchdog over claims of greenwashing. The advert, released in September 2019, [claims that the budget airline is most carbon efficient in Europe](#), asserting that they have “the lowest carbon emissions of any major airline.”

It is well-known that flying is an incredibly carbon-intensive activity. Therefore, airlines will be determined to promote their environment-friendly endeavors. However, Ryanair’s claim that it produces the lowest carbon emissions amongst all major airlines in Europe is questionable. According to the [Advertising Standards Authority](#), claims made in the advert are misleading and could not be legitimately backed-up.

Reportedly, data from as far back as 2011 was cited in support of the airline’s claims. This holds [little comparative value](#) in 2019. Moreover, some well-known airlines did not appear in Ryanair’s comparison. In general, Ryanair’s basis for their “lowest emissions” claim [lacks detailed analysis of how they came to this conclusion](#), with important information missing from reports.

## GREENWASHING & MANUFACTURING

### VOLKSWAGEN (VW)

A classic example is [Volkswagen](#), who admitted to cheating emissions tests by fitting various vehicles with a “defect” device, software which could detect when it was undergoing an emissions test and altering the performance to reduce the emissions level. All of this was while it was touting the low-emissions and eco-friendly features of its vehicles in marketing

campaigns. In actuality, these engines were emitting up to [40 times the allowed limit for nitrogen oxide pollutants](#).

## NESTLÉ

In 2018, [Nestlé released a statement](#) saying that it had “ambitions” for its packaging to be 100% recyclable or reusable by 2025. However, environmental groups were quick to point out that the company hadn’t released clear targets, a timeline to accompany its ambitions or additional efforts to help facilitate recycling by consumers. Greenpeace reacted to this by [releasing its own searing statement](#), in which it said, “Nestlé’s statement on plastic packaging includes more of the same greenwashing baby steps to tackle a crisis it helped to create. It will not actually move the needle toward the reduction of single–use plastics in a meaningful way, and sets an incredibly low standard as the largest Food and Beverage Company in the world.” In 2021, Nestlé, along with Coca–Cola and PepsiCo, were named the [world’s top plastic polluters](#) for the fourth year in a row.

## GREENWASHING & MEGA RETAILERS

### WALMART INC.

Greenwashing can harm a brand's reputation. As the world increasingly embraces the pursuit of greener practices, corporate actors face an influx of litigation for misleading environmental claims. In February 2017, [Walmart paid \\$1 million](#) to settle greenwashing claims that alleged the nation's largest retailer sold plastics misleadingly touted as environmentally responsible. [California state law](#) bans the sale of plastics labeled as "compostable" or "biodegradable," as environmental officials have determined such claims are misleading without disclaimers about how quickly the product will biodegrade in landfill environments.

Over the past years Walmart has proclaimed to “go green” with a sustainability campaign. However, according to the [Institute for Local Self-Reliance](#) (ILRS), “Walmart’s sustainability campaign has done more to improve the company’s image than the environment.” Walmart still only generates 2 percent of U.S. electricity from wind and solar resources. According to the ILRS, Walmart routinely donates money to political candidates who vote against the environment. The retail giant responded to these accusations by stating that “it is serious about its commitment to reduce 20 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions by 2015.”

## STARBUCKS CORPORATION

In 2018, [Starbucks](#) wanted to jump on trends such as “plastic straw bans,” so they came out with a [straw-less lid](#). Bu that lid [contained more plastic than the old lid + straw combo](#). They claim they’re recyclable but [how much plastic actually gets recycled](#) is up for debate.

## COLES SUPERMARKETS AUSTRALIA PTY LTD.

Upon closer inspection, you can regularly see that the business has spent more on the marketing campaign than on the environmentally sound practices themselves. One example is the Australian Supermarket giant, [Coles](#). In mid-2018, the company banned single-use plastic bags and started charging customers 15 cents to buy thicker reusable plastic bags.

The company stated that this was “[a crucial move to get single-use plastics out of landfills](#),” arguing that the fact customers had to pay for higher quality plastic bags, meaning they’d be more incentivized to use them again. The new bags used more petroleum-based plastic, took longer to break down and posed a greater threat to wildlife—and the company was pocketing 15c per bag.

This also shifted the social responsibility of the corporation to the individual. And, just 4 days after launching the new bags, a fisherman found one floating in the water, 35kms off the northern coast of Australia.

As one of the corporations that have a monopoly on the Australian Supermarket industry, it carries a large social and environmental responsibility. Coles' act of “environmentalism” did a lot more harm than good. Some initiatives Coles could have implemented that would have genuinely helped the environment would have been to stop selling “[miniature plastic versions of products](#),” or removed single-use packaging from its own branded products, or remove single-use plastic products (straws, cups, etc.) from their shelves.

## GREENWASHING & FASHION

### H&M

After launching their “*Conscious Collection*,” [H&M](#) claimed that “every piece in the collection is made from sustainably sourced material, such as 100% organic cotton or recycled polyester.”

Fortunately, some countries are starting to crack down on marketing that greenwashes. In 2019, Norway’s [Forbrukertilsynet](#) (Consumer Authority) [quickly put a stop to this](#), and ruled last

year that fast fashion brand H&M was under investigation for its [supposedly ethical “Conscious” collection](#). The Consumer Authority stated that the information on H&M’s website was general, and did not specify the actual environmental benefit for each garment specifically, such as the amount of recycled material in each garment.

H&M’s [“Pinatex” line of products](#) uses fruit leaves that would otherwise be discarded as a replacement for leather—even though the garments still contain petroleum-based chemicals, and are marketed as being “eco-friendly.” Furthermore, the amount of energy used to process the pineapple leaves consumes insane amounts of unrennewable resources which is arguably worse than using animal byproduct in the first place.

H&M and other fast fashion retailers are renowned for exploiting the vagueness of green terminology to appear more environmentally conscious and sell more clothes. This is a problem, because fast fashion is one of the biggest polluters on the planet, with more than £140 million worth of clothing ending up in UK landfills every year.

#### BOOHOO FASHION

In 2017, BooHoo announced they’d be [banning all wool in their clothes](#), even though none of their products contained wool. However, it quickly came to light that their “wool look” and fake fur products were made from petro-chemicals and much worse for the environment. Wool only represents [1.3% of the global fiber supply](#) and is a [very sustainable garment material](#).

The result? [They reversed the decision a week later](#). Later, [an investigation also revealed](#) that UK-based BooHoo laborers were paid £3 per hour. Sustainability goes hand in hand with ethics and responsible employment. Caring for the environment means nothing if you exploit your workers.

#### GREENWASHING & HOUSEHOLD GOODS

##### MOONLIGHT SLUMBER

[Moonlight Slumber](#) is an American manufacturer of baby mattresses. In 2017, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) approved a [final consent order](#) against them, after they made claims that their “organic” and “eco-friendly plant-based mattresses” had earned them the “Green Safety Shield.”

This made the product appear like it had been endorsed by an independent third party, and Moonlight Slumber marketed the “certification” as if it were. It was an endorsement made up by the company themselves for no reason other than making a product appear “greener.”

#### ORGANIX SHAMPOOS

Organix shampoos regularly claim that the product is natural. But natural is very different to organic, ethical, environmentally friendly and cruelty-free. The company’s marketing material also alludes to there being many other environmental benefits of using their product.

However, upon closer inspection, you find that [just one in 18 ingredients](#) of one product that claims to be “organic” is actually USDA Certified Organic. Plus the product comes in petroleum-based single-use non-recyclable plastic bottles. That’s three strikes.

#### TIDE PURCLEAN LIQUID

Cleaning detergents are ripe to be greenwashed. In this case, [Tide's “purclean” liquid](#) is in the spotlight. As soon as you land on the site, you’re greeted with the product sitting in the fronds of a healthy green tree. The background of the product images are made to look like imperfectly recycled cardboard, and we see pictures of delicious coconut and healthy ear of corn.

You can also see fresh grass arranged in the shape of the company logo, and its own statement that it’s the “1<sup>st</sup> plant-based detergent with the power of traditional cleaning products.” Yes, it’s the first plant-based detergent with the power of Tide’s other cleaning products.

The product description states that “Tide purclean™ is a formula made with 100% renewable wind power electricity\*...” When you look at the meaning of that asterisk (\*), you learn “The same facility also uses steam power, electricity represents approximately 50% of the total energy used.”

Steam power, that's fueled by coal? We're not sure. Either way, it's only 50% of the energy used. There’s also no mention of the product’s packaging. For instance, is the bottle made from recycled plastics, is the lid made from petrochemicals, is the label made from recycled paper, is the sticker glue biodegradable, and so on. All in all, this product page is swimming in beautifully distracting graphics, fancy words and unsubstantiated claims.

## GREENWASHING & GOVERNMENT

### THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

[The Australian Government](#), also known as the Commonwealth Government is perhaps one of the few governments that can be attributed to greenwashing. It recently spent climate funds on “[researching and upgrading to clean coal](#),” trying to improve the efficiency of coal-burning. Even if coal burned at 100% efficiency, it’s still a finite resource that creates carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) as it burns.

## GREENWASHING & WHITEGOODS

Fridges, freezers, dishwashers. You more than likely own one of these things and have probably seen a star rating or numerical rating of these whitegoods. But what do these actually mean?

Well, it might alarm you to hear that for a washing machine to not get an A+ rating, it would need to be powered by a gas-guzzling, big-block V8 engine. [The biggest carbon emission impact of clothing is the energy used to wash them](#). Scratch the surface on a lot of electronic appliance star ratings, and you’ll see just how much hogwash there is. You can buy a washing machine that’s got [A++++ in its model name](#).

## GREENWASHING & BOTTLED WATER

More than [60% of water bottles end up polluting waterways](#), in landfill, or as carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and methane from inefficient recycling processes. Even the water industry tries to [over represent its greenness](#). Plastic water bottles like Poland Spring, Evian, Fiji, and Deer Park all depict nature imagery, colorful images of rugged mountains, pristine lakes and flourishing wildlife printed on their labels. While the water may come from these locations, sourcing it from here has a massive impact on the local community. Plastic water bottles are designed to be single-use and are one of the greatest dangers right now to our environment.

### FIJI WATER

[Fiji Water](#), America’s most imported bottled water, sources its water from Fijian springs—while [12% of Fijians don’t have access to fresh, running water](#).

Fiji Water also donates money to local kindergartens and schools. A noble act, until you realize that [the company only donates to institutions](#) where most of the students are children of workers—therefore allowing the parents to come to work.

## GREENWASHING & PACKAGING

While many companies spend lots of money creating and greenwashing an “eco-friendly” product, the packaging is usually overlooked. [Single-use plastic packaging accounts for nearly half of global plastic pollution](#). As a result, it finds its way into marine environments, clogs drains and fosters the spreading of disease—just to name a few things.

The reliance on traditional materials such as aluminum, cardboard and glass will increase as [more and more countries banning single-use plastics](#) and implement taxes. This also means that the packaging industry is ready for innovation—and susceptible to greenwashing. However, there are some “greenwashed” materials that you should try to avoid.

## VEGAN GLUES

By default, the glue used in corrugated boxes is vegan as it uses adhesive polymers (bioplastics) derived from rubber trees. Collagen is the main ingredient in many types of glue. Collagen can be derived from plants, but it’s mostly derived from animal byproducts, usually leather and bone marrow.

Animal-based glue is commonly used in tapes, adhesives and other sticky parts of the shipping industry. Animal glue, however, is not used in the construction of corrugated cardboard. This is because it lacks the structural integrity to bind to pulp fibers that are being pulled in multiple directions.

Vegan cosmetic brands are quick to mention that their packaging is also “vegan.” In actual fact, “eco-friendly” cosmetics packaging is more about using fewer materials, just as much as it's about using the right materials.

## RECYCLED PLASTIC

There’s no arguing that Americans consume way too much petroleum-based plastic, and way too much of it ends up in landfills. Recycling plastic presents a tremendous challenge. As it’s heated up to be remolded, it releases carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and methane, powerful greenhouse gases (GHGs), into the atmosphere. [Not all plastics can be mixed](#), and when melted down, plastic loses its structural integrity, limiting what it can then be turned into.

Many materials that are made out of recycled plastic have come under scrutiny by conservationists. Roads made of recycled plastic for example. As they start to wear down, microscopic pieces of petroleum-based plastics ([microplastics and nanoplastics](#)) are dispersed.

These particles rise into the atmosphere for us to breathe or fall onto the ground surrounding the road to be washed into waterways with the next rainfall. While this isn't directly relevant to recycled plastic packaging, the fact remains—recycled petroleum-based plastic is still petroleum-based plastic.

## BAMBOO

Bamboo is being hailed as a sustainable replacement for plastic. It's fast-growing, renewable, easy to grow, and needs no pesticides. While there's no doubt that bamboo can step in and replace plastic in many applications, it does pose a few problems. Bamboo, as an agricultural product, grows best in tropical climates around the equator, so shipping it to manufacturing areas requires energy consumption and creates carbon emissions. Many products claiming the use of this material in their packaging have as little as [15% bamboo powder, the rest being a petrochemical resin](#).

## BIOPLASTICS

[Bioplastics are materials](#) made out of "natural" substances, rather than petroleum-based chemicals. More often than not, this natural substance is a plant-based material (corn, palm leaves, etc.) or biomass from composting facilities. While it's great that these materials are made from other discarded products, *bioplastics* also have inherent problems.

An [article published May 2018 on \*The Quint\*](#) researched this subject and found that plastic bags made from bioplastics still place the same threat to marine ecosystems, as they only biodegrade in industrial facilities. Bioplastics certified for both home and industrial compost will still not break down in water, where it poses the biggest threat to wildlife.

What's more, plant-based bioplastics are usually made from corn or coconut fiber. Corn and coconut plantations, along with palm oil, are responsible for deforestation of rainforests all over the world, but especially the Amazon. It's near impossible to establish whether or not the "plant-based" part of bioplastics comes from a cleared rainforest.

The most “eco-friendly” packaging is zero packaging. If there’s zero packaging used, then there’s zero packaging to dispose of. Fungus and hemp-based materials, along with other cultivated materials look set to grow in popularity. The fact remains that materials from an agricultural background are significantly better for the environment than petroleum-based materials.

#### CARDBOARD BOX

For many ecommerce brands, the most carbon-neutral packaging option is the traditional cardboard mailer box. Most cardboard is made from recycled paper products, and thanks to the economics of scale, is done so in a rather energy-efficient way.

If a cardboard box is plastic-free, has no packing slips, is printed with water-based ink and has no tape residue, it can be thrown in home compost where it will break down naturally and do no harm. The simple cardboard box is plastic-free packaging that's all too often forgotten about.