

# alive

+ Green or GREENWASHED?

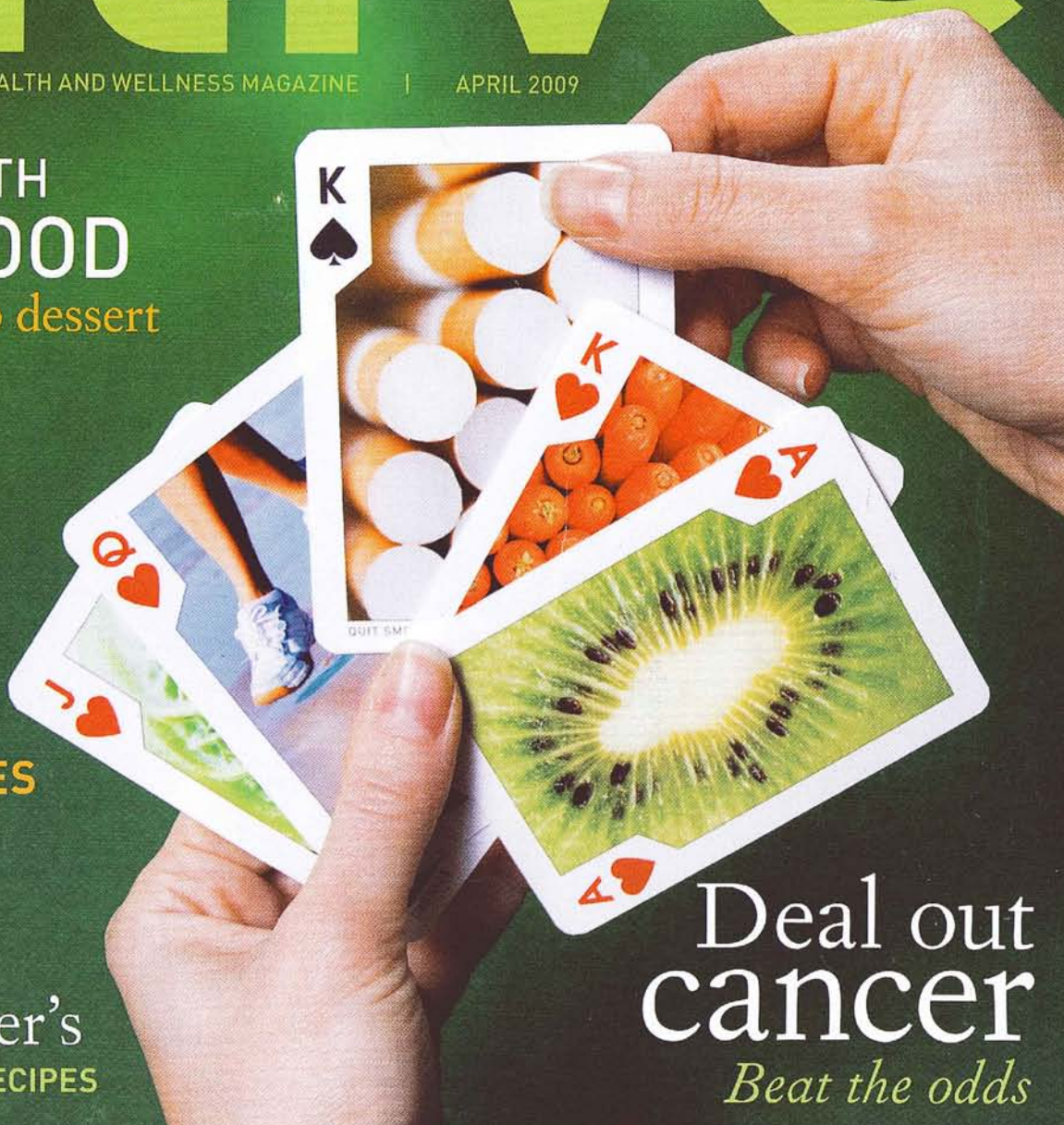
CANADA'S NATURAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS MAGAZINE | APRIL 2009

REV UP WITH  
**RAW FOOD**  
From soup to dessert

WHEAT  
GRASS  
ENERGY

**7** STRATEGIES  
TO SURVIVE  
CAREGIVING

Jamie Oliver's  
NEW RHUBARB RECIPES



Deal out  
**cancer**  
*Beat the odds*

# Drowning in GREENWASH

Suddenly everything for sale is eco-friendly, or says it is

*Dawn Rae Downton*

*Teresa Fisher has never been greenwashed. A Halifax hairstylist, Fisher, 23, has a wicked asymmetrical haircut and works in an industry awash in eco-bilking—the sale of personal care products. She “lives for product,” and has the hair to show it. Still, she’s avoided the scam. Have you?*

If you’ve bought soap, shampoo, even paper products you thought were good for the planet because they said so, you’ve likely been greenwashed faster than a newbie at a paintball game. Awed by Tide Coldwater’s claim to light cities? Wowed by the greening of Windex and Pledge manufacturer SC Johnson that you’ve been hearing about during *American Idol* commercial breaks? Sorry, you’ve been had there, too.

But not Fisher. She researches her purchases and reads labels with a jaundiced eye. Sure, for want of options she’s occasionally had to choose “something with only a sliver of environmental benefit, hardly what it claims”—but she always buys with eyes wide open.

Does that set her apart from her peers?

“Absolutely,” she says. “I see it here every day at the salon. I work with a lot of people, all young like me. Every one of them chooses products specifically because they think they’re environmentally friendly. But they’re not.”

Oh for the days of gormless false advertising, of swamps on offer in Florida, and bridges in Manhattan, even the venerable Internet scams: “Dear Sir, I’m Atumbo Olowimbe. I request your assistance for the sum of \$49,000,000.” That’s all so yesterday—and blissfully transparent.

Aimed at smart, careful consumers, greenwashing’s guff is headier stuff. It’s not that easy being green, complained Kermit—but now even the frog’s shilling for Ford. In marketing, at least, being eco-friendly is often just a matter of saying you are.

## WHITEWASH TURNS GREEN

Greenwash is the new whitewash, and it’s not so new at that. Back in 2001 the American activist Joshua Karliner said we were already drowning in it. The word’s been around since at least 1989, when the World Bank introduced a crew of in-house ecologists whose job, the Bank said, would be to end the underwriting of environmental

disasters. Watching delegates spill from their stretch limos into the Washington, DC, Sheraton for the grand announcement, the reporter for *New Scientist* magazine waxed skeptical. Might the rhetoric be a greenwash?

Teresa Fisher thinks the big bilk gained ground with Al Gore’s documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* and tipped when the Live Earth “eco-concerts” were staged and broadcast worldwide in July 2007. *Carbonfootprint.com* estimates Live Earth’s emissions at more than 31,500 tonnes, greater than 3,000 times the annual output of the average Briton.

Fisher was no fan of the hype, or the eco-cost.

“Live Earth was a greencrock all on its own,” she says. “It was supposed to raise awareness about climate change. All it did was raise carbon. A lot of people either dropped off or signed on—but they signed on only to thinking that “green’s the cool thing to do. Now, marketers rely on that.” >



“GREENWASH IS THE  
NEW WHITEWASH.”

# “IT’S NOT EASY BEING GREEN, COMPLAINED KERMIT—BUT NOW EVEN THE FROG’S SHILLING FOR FORD.”

## PSEUDO-GREEN ALERTS

But now, too, help is here. Branding Strategy Adviser, National Public Radio, the *New York Times*—everyone these days has a whistle to blow and a blog to blow it on. “Go green and mean it,” says *treehugger.com* to Loblaw’s about its eco-bag ads and its President’s Choice green line, rumoured to be under watch by Industry Canada.

Eco-bags themselves are routinely blog-debunked for their enormous Chinese carbon footprint. Even free-range alpaca sweaters get slammed. “C’mon!” sneers a commenter on the *Times*’ blog Dot Earth. “Are alpacas ever not free-range?”

Online greenwashing indexes, too, are fighting back. On EnviroMedia’s *greenwashingindex.com* you can out everything from ethanol projects to the sudden and convenient greening of Chevron and Volkswagen. (Perhaps to escape the taint of greenwash, blue may already be the new green. A Volkswagen commercial in a series called “Bluemotion” shows a nature lover using cables to try to jumpstart a rabbit run over on the road.)

Ottawa’s TerraChoice, privatized from government in 1995, doesn’t have a greenwashing index yet, but it does have a blog. It also administers Environment Canada’s Ecologo environmental certification and helps companies market eco-products. TerraChoice and Goliath clients such as Xerox, Sunoco, and Irving seem unlikely bedfellows.

But clients are also mom and pop businesses “who built something in the basement and want to make it greener,” says company president Scott McDougall.

Oil giants Sunoco and Irving are hardly environmental leaders, McDougall acknowledges—but they have a green product line or two, and that’s a start. A biologist by training, McDougall says he isn’t helping the foxes count the chickens in the henhouse: winning business for genuinely green goods can only help the eco-cause.

“The more green products win market share, the more the rest of the marketplace wants to emulate that behaviour—and the more [Irving and Sunoco] do, too.”

## GREEN POSEURS EXPOSED

Last year hairstylist Fisher was tuning out Live Earth and lamenting the pseudo-greening of her own small corner down east just as TerraChoice was noting the same trend more widely. In 13 years of business McDougall has seen consumer eco-interest wax and wane, and green market claims bobble along with it. But suddenly, over the past year or two, everything for sale was green—or said it was. Why the spike?

To investigate, TerraChoice took 1,018 products making about 1,700 environmental claims (some products made more than one claim) and stood them up against the hard, cold facts. Poseurs weren’t tough to find. The company simply inventoried and evaluated every environmental claim it came across in six big-box stores in Ottawa and Philadelphia (TerraChoice has a branch office in nearby Reading, Pennsylvania). The sobering results? A report called *The Six Sins of Greenwashing*.

## Green choices at your fingertips

A new Canadian website called *ethiquette.ca* helps consumers choose products and services that reduce harm to the environment and improve social conditions. The database is expanding with almost 1,000 eco-friendly Canadian consumer products listed.

The companion site, *ethipedia.net* provides information on sustainable practices companies are using to produce their goods and services.

“All the claims but one risked misleading their intended audience,” McDougall says. True, fewer than 1 percent were patently false, but consumers suppose so-called green companies to be honest, he points out. Even reputable eco-marketers, in turn, think they can be casual in their advertising. It can backfire on them terribly.

“At the point of purchase,” says McDougall, “few of us have the time or the inclination or the expertise to ask the tough questions,” and so TerraChoice is making a wallet card of *Six Sins* highlights.

It’s the kind of card you might take to Home Depot: along with personal care items—the kind Teresa Fisher sorts through daily—TerraChoice found that do-it-yourself home renoreware is a big offender.



Even the new CFL (compact fluorescent light) bulbs at home stores aren't what you think. They save energy, but a great product is one that stays green all its life, right through to disposal. Early CFLs contain mercury and go into landfills. In some cases, reports the *Canadian Review* of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, replacing your old incandescents with CFLs can actually increase emissions.

Although they're an example of TerraChoice's Sin of the Hidden Trade-Off (see sidebar), TerraChoice's McDougall still likes CFLs, saying, "The environment is complicated; light bulbs are complicated. If all we pay attention to is one issue, then we won't evolve."

While the TerraChoice study didn't sample clothes, "eco-textiles" may merit

a closer look. Green claims for a line of Vancouver's Lululemon yoga wear, for instance, were challenged by the Competition Bureau last fall, though for Lululemon that was as bad as things got.

Industry Canada's guidelines have no bite, says McDougall; thus the need for a study such as TerraChoice's in the first place. Yes, the guidelines are under review. However good that they might get, "there's certainly not enough enforcement to be quashing greenwashing."

#### LET'S GET MEAN ABOUT GREEN

In Europe CFLs are branded as dangerous waste. In Norway some of the strictest advertising standards in the world now ban any car from claiming to be "green," "clean," or "environmentally friendly."

In Canada, except for global initiatives such as Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified wood and wood products, now supported by Home Hardware and Domtar, we have next to nothing, says the Sierra Club's Stephen Hazell.

Along with groups such as Greenpeace, the Suzuki Foundation, Pollution Probe, and the World Wildlife Fund, Sierra hopes to pressure Ottawa to legislate better labelling, particularly for food.

Canadians deserve to know what's really Fair Trade, what's GMO, what has pesticides, and where it's all from, Hazell says. "Now it's a by-gosh and by-golly calculation." He and McDougall agree that consumers and business would >

## TerraChoice's 6 sins

- 1. Sin of hidden trade-off** The product has a sliver of green, but what's unsaid? Truly green means green from beginning to end. CFL light bulbs aren't, nor are "energy-efficient" electronics containing hazardous materials, nor even "100 percent post-consumer recycled" paper. It's still paper, and it brought down trees. CLAIM RATE: 57 percent.
- 2. Sin of no proof** Consumers can't certify or even evaluate the eco-promise. Some eco-clothing manufacturers have foundered here, as do cosmetics that claim they aren't tested on animals. Who says? How do you know? CLAIM RATE: 26 percent.
- 3. Sin of vagueness** The eco-promise is meaningless. So what if a cleaner is "all-natural"? Arsenic, uranium, mercury, formaldehyde—they're all-natural, too, and they're lethal poisons. Be skeptical around three-letter buzzwords such as bio- and eco-. CLAIM RATE: 11 percent.
- 4. Sin of irrelevance** Remember when everything was suddenly labelled "cholesterol-free," whether it ever contained cholesterol or not? Now that trick's gone green. Even cleaner advertised as CFC-free is trying to dupe you. Everything's CFC-free, and has been for nearly 30 years. CLAIM RATE: 4 percent.
- 5. Sin of lesser of two evils** Even green can hide nasty stains. Cigarettes are organic; they're biodegradable, too. [And cholesterol-free!] CLAIM RATE: 1 percent.
- 6. Sin of fibbing** Some products claim green attributes and even official certifications they simply don't have. Check claims for Energy Star ratings, for instance, against the Energy Star website. CLAIM RATE: less than 1 percent.

“WE NEED TO  
GET FOCUSED,  
ASK THE RIGHT  
QUESTIONS,  
AND ONLY BUY  
WHAT’S REALLY  
GREEN.”

benefit equally from more third-party certification of products against standardized scientific criteria. It would cut confusion and build brand loyalty.

#### CONSUMER-POWERED GREEN

McDougall thinks it’s consumers, for now, who can make the difference. “Consumer choice is a hugely powerful tool,” he says. “We need to get focused, ask the right questions,” and only buy what’s really green according to the US and Canadian government standards TerraChoice uses.

The company’s Ecologo is one of the audited certifications consumers can rely on (Green Seal is another, and there’s even an ISO standard—14020—for eco-claims). But while Ecologo belongs to Ottawa, the feds don’t fund it.

So what to do when you find yourself shopping where no certification can be found, not because you’re necessarily among unworthy goods, but because certification programs aren’t yet comprehensive?

That’s only one of TerraChoice’s challenges. The company worries, too, that manufacturers highlighting one kind of green performance to obscure other failures could shut down what little consumer confidence in green there is.

But the environmental marketing industry knows this: buyers most interested in finding greener products are those least likely to believe what companies tell them. And so the challenge to consumers is not impossible. McDougall thinks we’re smart enough to recognize scams and buy well intuitively.

Fisher thinks we can, too. Look beyond labels, she says. Go to company websites. Doubt everything. What’s green and what’s not may hardly be black and white, “but if you want to find out about it, you will. If you want to stay blind about it, you will.” **a**