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'Greenwashing' discourages eco-friendly behaviour: study

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By Adrian Morrow

Canadians are getting cynical about companies that make false environmental claims, which may be leading them to lead less eco-friendly lives, a new study suggests.

The Greendex, an annual survey of consumer habits in 17 countries by the National Geographic Society and the polling company GlobeScan Incorporated, found that while Canadians professed deep concern over environmental issues, they were less likely than people in most other countries to make green consumer choices.

"People have this tension in them – they kind of know what to do, but they're just not doing it," said Lloyd Hetherington, CEO of GlobeScan.

When asked for their reasons for not living more greenly, 46 per cent of Canadians cited their belief that companies are "greenwashing," lying about or exaggerating their products' environmental sustainability. This cynicism beat out cost and inconvenience as reasons for not helping the environment.

The cynicism is at least partly warranted, said Scott McDougall, president of TerraChoice, an Ottawa-based market research company. Earlier this year, TerraChoice found that 98 per cent of products making green claims could be accused of greenwashing, ranging from

outright fabrication to simply not providing proof of their eco-friendliness.

"Most cases of greenwashing we find are cases of overstatement or exaggeration, not outright falsehoods," Mr. McDougall said, adding that he worries cynicism will keep consumers' from making environmental change. "Even choosing these [greenwashed] products is surely better than the alternative, than buying products that aren't even trying."

Overall, Canadians were second only to Americans as the least environmentally friendly people in the Greendex. The survey, which measured consumption across a range of factors including home heating, food and transportation, found that most countries were slightly more environmentally friendly than the previous year.

The most eco-friendly countries (India, Brazil and China) were in the developing world. The survey used a random sample of 1,000 Canadian adults and is considered accurate to within plus or minus 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.