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HOREAU, RACHEL

Carson. That guy eyeing your plastic grocery bag disapprovingly. While eco-friendly types have been around for centuries, their behaviors have shifted. Transcendentalists spent time tilling the land—not swinging by the drugstore for a bottle of Method hand soap. Our perceptions of “going green” have changed, too. Whereas recycled paper towels might once have been relegated to the hippie market, companies now emphasize their products’ earthiness to appeal to a wide audience.

What’s with green’s shiny new allure? As concern over pollution and global warming reaches new heights, taking earth-friendly steps helps quell the powerlessness people feel over large, global issues, says University of Texas psychologist Art Markman. We look to our fellow man—members of our cliques, celebrities we admire—and sync up our goals, mimicking their behavior as a means toward an end (in this case, a healthier planet).

That’s the funny thing about public acts of greenery—they have the happy effect of nudging others onto the bandwagon, but they’re still, well, forms of display. (Composting in your backyard is one thing; wearing a KISS ME, I COMPOST T-shirt is quite another.) Even reclusive Thoreau wanted some attention, Markman says: “I don’t think he would’ve been pleased had nobody ever read what he wrote.” Showing your green colors demonstrates both a mark of belonging and the goal contagion needed for an idea to become a trend.

[FIELD GUIDE TO THE...]

Conspicuous Conservationist

By Michele Lent Hirsch

Latin Name: *Ostentatium greenus*

Notable Characteristics: Drives hybrid with MY OTHER CAR IS A BICYCLE bumper sticker; rides bike with 100 PERCENT VEGETABLE-POWERED decal. Often sports I ♥ RECYCLING T-shirt or water bottle. Visibly exhausted by the uphill battle against other people’s consumerism.

Songs & Calls: “Is this latte carbon-neutral?” “My second home is off the grid.” “Betcha can’t tell my sweater’s hemp.”

However concerned he may be about his carbon footprint, he's also making sure his concern is apparent.



CASE STUDY:

The Show-Off

(*Ostentatium greenus consumerus*)

A TOUR of this guy's newly remodeled kitchen involves a smug spiel about bamboo flooring, energy-efficient appliances, and a very pricey induction stove top. Such a kitchen isn't cheap—and he knows you know that. However concerned he may be about his carbon footprint, he's also making sure his concern is apparent, says Vldas Griskevicius, a professor of marketing at the University of Minnesota who studies how status motives, including the desire to be seen as altruistic, influence people's spending.

The drive to be favored by others “leads people to want to be seen as both wealthy and nice,” Griskevicius says. Among those who buy highly visible, eco-friendly goods, many admit to putting their own image above the goal of conservation. Yet when primed to think about status and given a *private* choice between small green or nongreen products, people often choose the more luxurious and less earth-saving, Griskevicius has found. If no one is privy to the transaction, personal comfort trumps all else.

Show-offs may gravitate toward the visibly green only if it's the pricier option. “If the Prius is too inexpensive, these people won't buy it because they don't want to appear poor,” Griskevicius explains. Higher prices can actually spur green buys: In 2007, after a Prius tax credit shrank and costs went up, sales increased by more than 68 percent.



CASE STUDY:

The Tree-Hugger

(*Ostentatium greenus hackysackor*)

TODAY, THE dreaded, Birkenstocked earth-lovers of yore persist more in stereotype than in flesh (although occasional sightings are reported, usually along the West Coast). Researcher Elise Amel, director of environmental studies at the University of St. Thomas, surveyed a big group of modern tree-huggers: attendees of the 2010 Living Green Expo. Respondents overwhelmingly described themselves as *concerned citizens* rather than *environmentalists*, despite “off the scales” scores on a conservation survey.

The e-word conjures extreme stereotypes, Amel says. When news got out about Butterfly, a woman who lived in a Sequoia tree in the late '90s, “I don't think there were a lot of Americans who said, ‘Yeah, I would sit in a Sequoia tree, too.’”

In a separate study, Amel's subjects read a scenario in which “environmentalists” called a senator to prevent drilling in an Alaskan wildlife refuge. Although more than 80 percent of participants agreed that drilling should be stopped, they deemed the callers “extreme” and felt the senator shouldn't give in to them. But when “concerned citizens” made the same calls, they were viewed as “respectable” and “knowledgeable.”

“Calling someone an environmentalist suggests everything they do is driven by that save-the-earth desire,” Markman says. We resist classification because we think of ourselves as complicated; even enviro-types don't want to feel two-dimensional.

BEHIND THE (LEAFY) CURTAIN



FEELING SAINTLY for picking up all-natural laundry detergent? Ironically, your next move will probably be more self-interested. A study in *Psychological Science* found that whereas people act more altruistic after exposure to green (vs. conventional) products, they behave less so and are more likely to cheat and even steal after purchasing the planet-friendly variety. That's because you earn moral “credit” by buying green items, says Nina Mazar, a researcher at

the University of Toronto. “Next time you are in a conflict-of-interest situation, you're more likely to do the selfish thing, because you've earned yourself some slack.”

By the same logic, a Prius purchase actually might give you license to do more pleasure cruising, or an Energy Star sticker might lead you to toss in more frequent, skimpy laundry loads. Says Markman: “Whether you actually succeed at conserving the environment by buying green is an open question.”