

Environmental Watch

Examining Environmental Claims and Their Costs • October/November 2006

Environmental Interest Group Writes Story About Itself -- New York Times Publishes It As News

Claim

“Green building with an Oregon twist in the Sunday *New York Times*. The piece profiles a house near Mount Hood that’s the first single-family residence in the West to win LEED certification. ... Fuller disclosure: the article was written by Colleen Kaleda, who’s the back-up editor for Tidepool (operated, of course, by Sightline)...”

Eric de Place entry in The Daily Score, Sightline Institute, http://www.sightline.org/daily_score, October 16, 2006 (Accessed 10/26/2006)

Facts

Formerly known as Northwest Environment Watch, the Sightline Institute is a Seattle-based environmental organization that promotes a range of government regulations to help improve the environment. One program they support is a green building program known as Leadership in Environmental and Energy Design (LEED) which is managed by the U.S. Green Building Council.

On Sunday October 15, the *New York Times* real estate section published a story about a new LEED certified house in Oregon. The story was not identified as opinion but as straight journalism. Both the writer and the subject of the story, however, had a clear bias in favor of LEED and the subject of the story is a contributor to the organization that pays the author’s salary.

The *New York Times*, however, did not originally report the conflict of interest. Beyond a simple ethical problem, the story does not provide a complete or fair picture of LEED and its shortcomings.

Conflict of Interest

The story in the *New York Times* is about a new home built by Tom Kelly. In their blog, the Sightline Institute recommends the article, saying “Full disclosure: the house is owned (and I think built) by Tom Kelly, who’s a Sightline donor.” So, how did the *New York Times* find out about the home?

The author of the story knows Tom Kelly. Actually, the author relies on him, in part, for her salary. The author of the *New York Times* story is Colleen Kaleda, who works for the Sightline Institute as an editor of an environmental news service known as Tidepool.

The Sightline Institute’s blog admits this: “Fuller disclosure: the article was written by Colleen Kaleda, who’s the back-up editor for Tidepool (operated, of course, by Sightline) and who contributed hugely to Sightline’s recent report, Property Wrongs.” The “Property Wrongs” report attacks Oregon’s property fairness Measure 37 which passed in 2004.

We brought this to the attention of the Public Editor at the *New York Times*, and they have added this note to the story on their web page: “After the article appeared, a reader alerted The Times that Mr. Kelly had made financial contributions to a nonprofit organization in Seattle for which the writer of The Times article, a freelancer, had worked. ... The writer did not list her work at Sightline when she filled out a contract that The Times requires of all freelancers. She later told The Times that she had not been aware of Mr. Kelly’s connection to Sightline when she quoted him in the article. Had Times editors been aware of her association with Sightline, they would not have given her the assignment.”



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The Sightline Blog had this response which it added to its original posting: “First, Kaleda’s freelance writing work is entirely independent from the work she does for Sightline. ... Second, Colleen had no idea that Tom Kelly was a donor when she was writing about him. ... Finally, I’d like to apologize if my sloppy blogging gave the appearance of impropriety where there was none. I intended it merely as kudos for a job well done, and to note a coincidence.”

This tone is certainly at odds with the original blog entry where they stress their close relationship, even saying “Sightline is everywhere.” Writing this off as “sloppy blogging” is also unsatisfactory. The purpose of the entry was, in fact, to highlight the connection. The connection of the writer and the subject of the story was not incidental to the blog entry, it was the central message.

The key question, though, is whether the reporter knew that Mr. Kelly was a donor to Sightline. Only Ms. Kaleda can say whether that was the case. If she did not know that Mr. Kelly was a donor or a fellow activist with whom she sympathised, how did she find out about the story? Freelance reporters typically find topics through personal contacts. If that is the case, then the conflict, whether financial or philosophical, remains.

The problem with publishing a story written by someone with a philosophical and/or financial interest in the subject is that such an article is unlikely to present both sides of the story or double-check the facts. This story is such an instance. Information that contradicts the author’s premise, unfortunately, did not find its way in the story

LEED - Overstating the Record

One of the key claims made to justify LEED buildings is that the additional up-front cost to receive LEED certification is small and that the amount can quickly be made up by energy savings. This claim is uncritically repeated in the *New York Times* story.

The story notes that “Whether building custom homes or simply buying green, homeowners should expect to pay more. Mr. Hall [of the U.S. Green Building Council] estimates green building increases a home’s cost about 5 percent over a traditionally built house, though that percentage can rise, depending on materials.”

There are a couple of problems with this claim.

First, these numbers are not borne out on the ground. The most recent studies available on USGBC’s web page make a fundamental statistical mistake. Looking at the buildings that did receive LEED certification, they find the additional cost is about 5% and that the energy savings can offset those costs. They do not, however, include the cost of construction or energy savings for buildings where the builder decided not to go with LEED. One reason builders may have decided not to use LEED in those circumstances was because the cost was prohibitive.

In other words, the 5% estimate is low because the estimate only includes buildings where the costs and benefits were in line while leaving out any buildings where the costs would have been high. This makes the 5% estimate a low-water mark because it includes only the cheapest LEED buildings. If more buildings were to use LEED it is likely that the cost would be much higher and the benefits much lower.

We are already seeing this. Our research has shown numerous examples (Seattle City Hall, schools in the Tacoma School District, etc.) where the energy savings are much less than expected, or where energy costs even go up. One retail company that looked at using LEED standards told us that energy costs were actually higher in LEED certified stores than non-LEED stores.

The *New York Times* itself story never mentions the cost of the home that is the topic of the story. Instead, the author mentions only the generic 5% estimate. Ms. Kaleda did not respond to an

e-mail asking why the actual cost was not included. Given the types of features included in the project, it is likely that the cost to meet LEED standards was much higher than an additional 5%. It will be interesting to see if the energy savings meet the projections.

Given the conflict of interest involved in the story, it is not surprising that such facts are left out.

Costs

The costs to the public are many. First, this is simply poor journalistic ethics. The *New York Times* should not print stories by those with a personal interest in the outcome of an issue and representing them as objective journalism.

Second, such conflicts of interest lead to only part of the story being told. Ironically, another blog entry by Eric de Place complains about coverage of a speaker advocating an upcoming Washington state ballot initiative, saying that the “newspaper article neither refutes his assertions nor mentions his subsequent confession in the debate” that one of his facts is questionable. The *New York Times* article de Place praises in the same blog, however, never even attempts to present both sides of the issue. As a result a skewed image of the financial costs is portrayed.

But there is also an environmental cost. Given the limited resources builders and governments have to address environmental issues, those who care about environmental stewardship should strive to support the programs that achieve the best results for lowest cost. Focusing on trendy or exotic programs with high cost and low return (or in the case of some LEED projects, actually increased energy use), undermines the ability to maximize environmental progress and tests the willingness of the public to continue to fund such efforts.

The *New York Times* article on LEED is an example of how not to do environmental journalism.