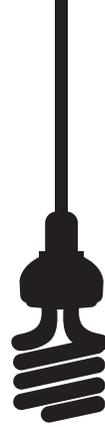


ECO-FADS

**How the rise of trendy environmentalism
is harming the environment**

TODD MYERS



Chapter 1

The Rise of Eco-Fads

The photo takes more than a full page of the magazine and it is stark. It shows acre upon acre of decaying tree stumps, a vast barren area where a mighty forest once stood. Only a small patch of trees remains, sitting on top of a mound of dirt. The caption underneath the photo reads “Clear-cut land in Washington.”¹ Those few dozen trees are all that is left in a large area of what was forest.

Published in 2002 by the technology magazine *Business 2.0*, it is the kind of arresting photo that is designed to imply scientific meaning by evoking an emotion. “How can something that ugly, that stark, be good for the environment?” is the question we are intended to ask. The photo is intended to demonstrate the real environmental damage humans are doing to the planet without having to scientifically support the claim. And there is no doubting that the view is ugly. It is not the type of thing people hike miles to see or desire as the view from the home of their dreams. That the view is undeniably ugly implies that the environmental impact of that scene must be undeniably negative.

The photo complemented an accompanying article that discussed a new forestry technology that would make such clear-cuts a thing of the past. A new breed of tree, hybrid poplars, which the article calls “supertrees,” was created using biotechnology that, according to the photo caption, “could greatly reduce the need for such heavy logging.”² The new trees, the article promised, are fast growing and obviate the need to harvest the large, old trees that are used in home and commercial construction today. Growing in less than half the time of conifer timber, hybrid poplars, the article asserts, could be grown as a crop without reducing wildlife habitat.

There are other purported benefits as well. Hybrid poplars soak up toxins in the soil. They can grow in soils that would harm other types of trees, but

these bioengineered trees are able to remove toxins from the soil, harmlessly sequestering them inside the lumber for decades.

No more clear-cuts. Forests would be saved. Environmental cleanup would occur naturally. The idea represents the type of ingenuity Americans pride themselves on. The article presented the kind of technological solution that makes the world a better place: creating new jobs and enhancing our lifestyle and prosperity. It seemed to offer the best of all worlds.

At the time this article appeared, I was the Communications Director for the Department on Natural Resources, the chief forestry agency in Washington state. It intrigued me for a variety of reasons.

Forestry in Washington is extremely controversial. Nationwide the spotted owl is a symbol of the battle between timber communities and environmentalists, and Washington state was ground zero in that fight. Much of Western Washington was engaged in forestry at some point in the last 100 years, and there are still communities that are appropriately known as “timber towns” in several areas.

Choosing between ending people’s jobs and protecting the environment is not an academic exercise at the Department of Natural Resources. The agency is involved literally in every timber harvest conducted in the state, either by issuing permits to private loggers or in planning harvests on state land. Revenues from timber sales go to the state’s school construction fund. With every planned harvest, the impact on wildlife, the economy, salmon, jobs or simply the beautiful forest views we enjoy was subject to heated debate and discussion. The protracted process involved public meetings, letters to the editor, political speeches and, ultimately, since the head of the agency was elected by the public, a vote. Agency officials were always seeking ways to reduce the friction between these passionate and competing forces. Any new idea that could break the deadlock was always welcome.

Hybrid poplars, the *Business 2.0* article claimed, promised to do all of those things. The high-tech poplars, however, became my introduction to the phenomenon of eco-fads – the quick-fix environmental solution that relies more on its initial gut-level appeal as a simple, feel-good solution than proven scientific merit.

Despite the promises, hybrid poplars suffer from many limitations.

For instance, the very speed at which the tree grows is one of its main drawbacks. The strength of lumber is related to the distance between the growth rings of the tree it is cut from. This is why baseball players using wooden bats are told to hold the bat with the label up. At home plate, famed catcher Yogi

Berra supposedly once told home-run champion Hank Aaron to hold the bat so he could read the label, otherwise he would break his bat. Aaron replied, "I came up here to hit, not to read."³

The reason Berra gave the advice is bat makers place the label across the grain, ensuring that the ball will strike where the growth rings are closest. The tight grain there is the strongest part of the bat and prevents it from splintering when the ball is hit.

The same is true of structural lumber. A tight grain provides more structural integrity useful in building houses. In Washington state, more than 90 percent of the timber sold by the state is intended for structural use.

The problem with hybrid poplar, and similar fast-growing trees, is the growth rings are farther apart, significantly reducing the strength of the lumber. Anyone who has seen the way that poplars or cottonwoods bend dramatically in the wind can understand that, while these trees are very flexible, they are not very strong.

This is not to say that there isn't a market for these trees. They are used in furniture and other light uses that don't require the ability to support large amounts of weight. They are also used to make pulp, and some of the byproducts, like a residue of the pulping process called black liquor, can be used to produce energy.

The basic problem, however, is that they are not a substitute for slower-growing, but strong, softwood trees like Douglas fir, hemlock and pine. The very fact that these trees grow slowly makes them desirable. It also means that cutting them seems like more of an irretrievable environmental loss because it takes so long to replace the trees, the habitat and the scenic beauty they provide.

Put simply, the demand for slow-growing timber creates that very conflict that we at the Department of Natural Resources faced every day.

There are other problems as well. Poplars, like cottonwoods and other fast-growing species, consume a tremendous amount of water. In the few places in Washington state where poplars grow naturally, they are located near swampy land, in river bottoms, or next to dams that supply significant amounts of irrigation water. If there is an environmental conflict that is more controversial than forestry, it is the public debate over how to use water.

Water is claimed by communities, farmers, fish biologists, Indian tribes, hydroelectric energy producers and many others. Allocating that water is a politically charged process, and few are satisfied with the portion they receive. A dramatic expansion of hybrid poplar cultivation, as envisioned by the editors

of *Business 2.0*, would mean adding to the heavy demands on water for irrigation, drinking, fish and carbon-free hydroelectric power.

Such tradeoffs are common in environmental debates. Sometimes reducing the use of one resource means increasing the use of others. In the case of hybrid poplars, it is a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire. As a result of the high demand for water, only a small percentage of the available land is suitable for the tree.

The search for easy environmental solutions is understandable. When faced with pictures of ugly clear-cuts, oil spills or similarly stark images that portray the impact human activity has on the environment, it is natural that we work to reduce that impact. There is a strong feeling that in a country as rich as ours we can afford to spend some of our disposable income to improve environmental sustainability. It is hard to feel good about living well when the cost of doing so results in such serious damage to the environment. Working to reduce our impact on the environment is the right thing to do and has the side benefit of making us feel good about ourselves. Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts are taught early on to leave their campsites cleaner than they found them. Protecting the environment is simply an extension of that principle.

Taking the right steps to protect the environment, therefore, seems fairly straightforward. Some actions are obviously destructive to the environment, and avoiding those actions should be clear enough. There may be some personal or social sacrifice, but the choice, at least, between what will help or harm the environment, is clear.

As we have seen in the case of hybrid poplars, however, that desire for simplicity can open the door to approaches that do little environmental good, or that actually damage the environment, because they ignore the complexity involved in environmental sustainability. But these simplistic ideas give people the feeling they are having a positive impact on the planet. Easy eco-fads are often substituted for real solutions, and once they become the current fashion they can be very hard to dislodge.

Embracing Eco-Fads

Eco-fads become widely accepted not simply because these simple ideas are attractive in themselves. A number of powerful people have a strong interest in promoting eco-fads.

Politicians and policymakers are some of the loudest proponents of eco-fads. Politicians know that protecting the environment is popular with the public, and advocating steps that appear to improve sustainability is an easy way to gain the support of organized green groups and of voters.

Moreover, politics is about creating contrasts among competing candidates. A candidate who can set up a choice between an opponent whom she says will increase the number of forest clear-cuts, oil spills or global warming and herself, who will protect pristine forests, create sparkling clean water and keep polar bears safe by stopping global warming, is likely to enjoy electoral success. No matter how much people realize that they use wood products, emit carbon dioxide or burn oil shipped in tankers, they still don't want to be associated with a politician who unapologetically defends the impacts that are associated with those modern economic activities.

Politicians also need to demonstrate progress. Environmental sustainability is, by its very nature, a long-term issue. Progress in protecting the environment is measured over decades, not months or years. As a result, quick and easy policies that show results in only a few years are very attractive, even if the true benefits of such policies are far less than long-term alternatives.

It shouldn't be surprising that some companies see business opportunity in the growth of eco-fads. Products that claim to be greener not only offer differentiation from similar products made by competitors, they also cater to consumers with greater disposable income. Shoppers willing to spend a little extra to buy products labeled as "green" are highly coveted by retailers and businesses that want to find new ways to reach them.

Businesses have always worked to reduce the amount of energy and resources they use in an effort to cut costs, lower prices and become more competitive. Now, these routine cost-cutting reductions are touted as "eco-friendly" because they also reduce the impact on the environment.

There is nothing wrong with reducing material and energy use as long as it doesn't cross the line between efforts that actually reduce environmental impact and products that become more profitable for their marketability as green products rather than for their actual environmental benefit. The fact that these improvements are being made is not different – only the way they are marketed changes.

The media readily embraces eco-fads that offer uncomplicated and compelling stories with the promise of environmental benefit. This effect is compounded when environmental reporters are chosen because of their commitment to a particular set of environmental policies rather than their undirected intellectual

curiosity. Just as the editors of *Business 2.0* wanted to promote a story they felt would have a positive impact on environmental stewardship, environmental reporters at newspapers and other news media promote similar efforts.

Environmental groups offer awards to environmental reporters for stories these groups feel help the cause. News stories that highlight a potential environmental danger are much more likely to win these awards, particularly the more prestigious awards, than stories examining failed environmental policies or indicating that a potential environmental threat is not all that it is purported to be. Reporters who write stories about potential threats that never materialize are rarely questioned or criticized afterwards. There will be many more hard questions asked of a reporter who downplays a potential threat that turns out to be real. As a result, environmental reporters, especially those with a sympathetic ideological bent, are more likely to err on the side of exaggerating threats than to offer a mild or moderate assessment of environmental risks.

Frequently, the result of this exaggeration is not benign. The public and policymakers take cues from the media about what priorities are important and how they stack up against other issues of the day. Reporters who exaggerate environmental risks to compete for the attention of editors and the public can cause policymakers to waste money and resources on heavily reported, but minor, problems, leaving fewer resources to address more serious issues.

Scientists are also seduced by eco-fads. One of the most frequently heard appeals in the debate about environmental policy is to the credibility of scientists. The scientific method is rightly respected for its logical, detached and unemotional claim to truth. The claim of scientific validity is often used as the trump card in claiming support for particular public policies. Elected officials who disagree with “the science” are likely to find themselves on shaky political ground and will soon be answering questions about their belief in evolution, a helio-centric solar system, the moon landing and the like.

Difficulties arise, however, when scientists and others ignore real gaps in our knowledge and fill in the gray areas of uncertainty with personal, value-laden decisions. It is common to find scientists in an area of study disagreeing about the appropriate public policy. These disagreements are often portrayed as scientific, when they are actually differences in values and risk aversion. For instance, fish biologists are likely to have a very low tolerance for environmental risks to salmon, preferring very costly policies that save a few salmon over spending money on other areas of public policy, protecting private property rights or keeping taxes low.

This can be compounded when scientists overestimate the level of their own knowledge. Few scientists are rewarded for admitting that they still have much

to learn about their area of expertise, even if that is true. Scientists who offer compelling explanations for observed phenomena, while minimizing areas of uncertainty, are more likely to rise to the top of their profession even when their explanations lead down the wrong path.

As a result, the average person who wishes to be environmentally responsible is bombarded by conflicting messages, encouraging them to embrace fads that offer solutions to environmental threats. Individuals have many reasons to embrace these fads unexamined. Few people have the time, interest or expertise to test every environmental claim they hear. In the midst of busy lives there is little incentive to ask: Do biofuels really reduce carbon dioxide emissions? Are polar bears really threatened by global warming? Are hybrid poplars really a solution to intensive forestry and clear-cuts? These are complicated questions that rarely have clear scientific answers. It is also difficult to determine the policy and economic consequences of these policies. Scientists, economists and others whose careers are built around answering these questions frequently disagree among themselves.

So how can we know what solutions make sense and what don't? To deal with these issues, people often have shorthand rules of thumb, called heuristics, to apply when weighing competing claims. The most common shorthand rule is the appeal to authority, where we ask ourselves "What do the experts say?" and then follow their lead. But what if politicians, businesses, the media, and even scientists, have strong incentives to exaggerate environmental threats and to offer simplistic eco-fads as solutions? How can we trust what we are hearing and know what information is real and what is embellishment?

This confusion is compounded by the natural desire of individuals to believe they are doing good without invoking much sacrifice. Eco-fads are emotionally satisfying because they offer easy solutions that cut through confusion, while allowing individuals to derive the emotional satisfaction of protecting the planet. When you add a social component to that, with peer pressure encouraging us to carry "green" shopping bags, replace incandescent light bulbs with easy to recognize compact fluorescent light bulbs or trade a traditional gas-guzzler for a hybrid vehicle, we find that we can receive social benefits in addition to that warm feeling in our hearts.

Deciding to reject an eco-fad means choosing to swim against the current of these various powerful forces. If you've ever seen a salmon at the end of its long migration, spawning to the place of its birth, you have an idea of how taxing this can be, emotionally and physically. At least salmon are rewarded with the continuation of their species at the end of their trip.

Environmental Fashion and Iconoclasm

The efforts to promote eco-fads set off claims and counter-claims that can lead believers and skeptics to engage in counterproductive policies.

Environmental activists understand that social pressure is a powerful force, and they openly cultivate the image that environmentalism is chic. They enlist movie actors to narrate ads for major environmental groups or pose (mostly) nude to support them. Who can ignore the plea that “animals have rights” when it is emblazoned across the chests of the Houston Rockets’ dance team?

Professional actors, whose business is the very definition of trendsetting and fashion, feed the popularity of eco-fads by latching on to simple messages enhanced by their personal appeal. Who could oppose the reconstruction of New Orleans with “green” buildings when Brad Pitt is helping foot the bill? While few people actually watched Leonardo di Caprio’s film about global warming, those who did were probably as attracted to the narrator as they were to the message.

Fashion magazines like *Vanity Fair* feature “green” issues, packed with celebrities announcing their commitment to the environment in a way that makes standing up for environmental values a fashion statement. It is rarely asked whether the lifestyles of celebrities and fashion moguls are, in fact, consistent with the values they proclaim. The reasons famous people subscribe to favored environmental policies are less important to activists than securing their vocal support. Come for the sex appeal, stay for the ideology.

Many on the right react to this confluence of the trendy and the ideological with another powerful, and trendy, approach: iconoclasm. Conservatives become rebels without a cause, basing their approach on opposition to whatever appeal is being offered by fashionable environmentalists.

When environmentalists like the World Wildlife Fund promoted Earth Hour, encouraging people to turn off their lights for one hour to emphasize the impact of energy use on the planet, conservatives did the opposite. The conservative grassroots organization Grassfire, announced “carbon belch day,”⁴ encouraging people to use extra electricity, turning lights on, dialing their heaters up and generally wasting resources. This reaction may have had the visceral appeal of annoying the environmentally inclined, but it is not a productive reaction in any sense of the word. Who wants to expend additional energy simply to impoverish themselves? The only possible goal is to answer kind for kind – to protest a trendy ideology opponents see as meaningless with an opposite approach that is equally meaningless.

There are legitimate reasons thoughtful conservatives oppose the environmental approaches promoted through eco-fads. Such fads, and the policies they endorse, are perceived as Trojan horses for a larger goal. They argue there is legitimate concern that environmental causes are used merely as an excuse for expanding government control and infringements upon liberty. Prominent environmentalists themselves help promote this perception.

When Al Gore announced he had won the Nobel Prize for his work on climate change, he told the assembled audience that the issue, "...also provides us with opportunities to do a lot of things we ought to be doing for other reasons anyway." Such statements feed the legitimate concern of opponents and encourage those on the right to reject all things "green" out of fear they are being used to expand government control over the economy. This effect sometimes leads those on the right to reject environmental issues entirely, rather than addressing them within a more comfortable ideological framework.

Ideology Over Reality

The result of all these influences is that eco-fads, once established, are very difficult to dislodge. Who wants to believe that one's actions to save the planet don't actually promote the values one has publicly embraced? Who wants to replace clarity of action with the recognition that truly productive action is difficult? When was the last time you heard a politician say the policies he had long promoted are actually wrongheaded and counterproductive? It is always easier to say, "Even if this doesn't change the world, it is better than doing nothing."

Unfortunately, that is not always the case. With increasing frequency, eco-fads are worse than doing nothing. In some cases such fads are counterproductive, actually doing more damage to the environment than they prevent.

Even more often, eco-fads draw energy and resources away from solving real environmental problems. Politicians, business owners and people in the media find they gain more benefit from tackling dramatic problems with simple solutions than from broad, but amorphous, environmental risks that require a menu of solutions, each of which plays a small role. Public priorities, as a result, are set based not on the actual level of risk to the environment, but on the popular appeal of the solution and the drama of the images associated with the problem.

Stories like that published in *Business 2.0*, with dramatic photos of clear-cuts or other environmental impacts, are often intended to influence public

policy decisions. But, if they don't tell the whole story or, worse, are actually misleading, they can make addressing environmental risks more difficult.

The picture caught my eye for a couple reasons. Working at Washington's forestry agency, I was attuned to any discussion and portrayal of forestry in the state.

More importantly, however, I had driven past the location where the photo was taken dozens of times. The photo was taken along Interstate 90 in the middle of the Cascade Mountains. The photographer, looking for a dramatic example of a clear-cut forest, had been seduced by such a stark image and pulled off the road to shoot the photo.

There is only one problem – it isn't a clear-cut. The *Business 2.0* image actually shows the bottom of Kechelus Lake, a mountain reservoir that stores water over the winter. The photo, taken in summer when the lake is low, depicts the decaying stumps leftover from decades before when the lake was created. The small clump of trees standing in the middle of the image actually sits on a small island during most of the year. Calling this image a clear-cut is no different than calling a city building a clear-cut, because once upon a time trees stood on the site.

What's more, the area depicted in the photo is many hundreds of acres, a much larger area than would ever be allowed to be logged by modern forest regulations in Washington state. Despite being portrayed as typical of forestry practice in Washington, the photo was neither a clear-cut nor representative of any logging that could have been done anywhere else in Washington, even under the most intensive regimen of harvest.

Knowing that the photo was falsely labeled, I emailed the editors, believing they would naturally want to issue a correction. At the very least they could ask for their money back from the photographer they hired to shoot the photo. The reaction I received demonstrates how difficult it is to dislodge established eco-fads.

The editors initially asked me to write a short letter, highlighting the error in the photo, noting that such a clear-cut would never be allowed under Washington's laws and explaining some of the limits of hybrid poplars. I submitted the requested letter and they thanked me for my constructive input.

When I received the next issue of *Business 2.0* I was surprised to see the note they included. Rather than publish my letter the editors wrote, at the very end of all the letters, the following correction:

“In a photo caption within our feature on bioengineered trees, we identified the shot as ‘clear-cut land in Washington,’ implying that it was indicative of current forestry practices in the state. In fact, the land had been cleared to build a reservoir. Although there are examples of land in Washington that has [sic] been similarly devastated by clear-cutting, current state regulations require that loggers leave at least eight trees per acre.”⁵

This is tepid, to say the least. They didn’t mention that rules going back decades prevented harvests anywhere near the size of that implied by the photo. In fact, there are no similar examples of present day clear-cutting.

While the editors were obliged to admit the photo was incorrect, they continued to claim that the substance of the photo was right, albeit without any proof. They admitted only the minimum they had to, holding tightly to the values and policies the photo implied. The photo fit the image of forestry they held in their minds, and they continued to embrace the message of the photo, even when the photo itself proved to be inaccurate.

In the end, the editors understood how powerful that picture was, and undermining its power was too much for them. To admit the truth would mean questioning the justification of the entire article and admitting not merely that the photo was a mistake, but that their position on the issue was not on firm footing. That is a key element of understanding the strength of eco-fads. The commitment to the policies or actions are, too frequently, based not on whether or not they help the environment, but on the personal, emotional feeling that taking these steps or supporting particular policies makes one a good person. Eco-fads help people to believe they are part of a large, important movement.

The basic question is, what incentive did the editors have to risk all of that over what they regarded a technical mislabeling of a powerful image?

Protecting the Environment or Gaining Emotional Satisfaction?

The challenge for those of us who care about the environment face is how to promote true environmental sustainability while rejecting emotionally satisfying but counterproductive eco-fads. It is a problem I have thought about over the decade I have worked in environmental policy.

When I began my work in environmental policy in 2000, I saw the issues in much the same way most people did. I believed the basic trade-off was between a strong economy and a healthy environment. The question was not, “How do we most effectively protect the environment?,” but, “Are we as a society willing to pay the economic cost to achieve a higher goal?” The policies offered by environmental groups would achieve the goal they desired but were often very costly and undermined personal liberty, all so a few dedicated greens could satisfy their personal values.

Closely working day after day with foresters, biologists, geologists and others dramatically changed my thinking. I realized that while the threats to the environment were all too real, the most prominent policy options were not effective at making actual improvements in protecting the environment. Policies that claimed the mantle of scientific validity often had only a weak, tangential relationship to the full range of scientific options and knowledge.

Most enlightening was the understanding that environmental sustainability and economic sustainability are not in conflict but work hand-in-hand. That fact was key to the realization that we have an opportunity to continue making great strides in environmental sustainability without falling for eco-fads that are so frequently costly and ineffective.

The first step to understanding this crucial point is to recognize eco-fads for what they are and admit to ourselves that they often do not truly advance environmental sustainability. From global climate change to healthy local forests and reducing waste, eco-fads distract us from real efforts and an honest assessment of environmental risk and priorities.

Making an honest assessment of long-held beliefs is not an easy process. Rejecting eco-fads, and their emotional comfort, means we have to be more questioning of what we read, even when we don't have ready information about alternatives. We will have to give up some of the emotional comfort enjoyed by embracing eco-fads. Consumers will have to understand that businesses' commitment to “green” marketing is often more about profit than sustainability. Politicians will have to say that they do not have clear or even effective answers to all environmental problems and voters should scorn those who claim otherwise. Reporters will have to write stories with more nuance, contain fewer compelling, albeit misleading, images and watch as their gripping prose is invaded by careful caveats. Scientists will have to admit they are less certain about the state of environmental knowledge and will have to step out from behind the shield of scientific authority and argue on the unsteady ground of values.

Difficult as it is, shedding these pretenses is more honest. It offers more promise of real environmental sustainability, and it is more likely to leave an environmental legacy that we can all be proud of.