

# Navigating through a wilderness of Eco-labels

Author: Timothy Stamp

Recent years have seen a vast increase in the number of eco-labeling programs and certified products on the shelves of supermarkets and DIY stores, in coffee shops and across the high streets. Beyond the vast array of choice, accusations of ‘green-washing’ serve to further complicate ethical-buying, asking the consumer to not only understand the barrage of labels, but question their credibility also. When sifting through the sea of ethical stamps our products are adorned with, even the most well-informed and ethically-motivated consumer can be excused from feeling a little overwhelmed, and perhaps a little sceptical. For the earth-conscious consumer, in a vast, green wilderness of eco-labels, how is one to make sense of the plethora of pictograms?



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**Fear not! This article navigates the recent explosion in eco-labeling, explains what is driving this trend, and suggests how the ethical consumer can succeed in their endeavours to buy ‘the right thing’ without fear of being misled.**

Currently, it is estimated that there are in excess of 600 “green labels” worldwide, a vast number of labels with a huge amount of information lurking behind each one. Factor in that many are self-certified, or designed by the manufacturers themselves, and that some are even perhaps *designed* to confuse, and the laudable task of buying ethically becomes a daunting one.

***“Too numerous labels might confuse customers” (BBMG 2009)***

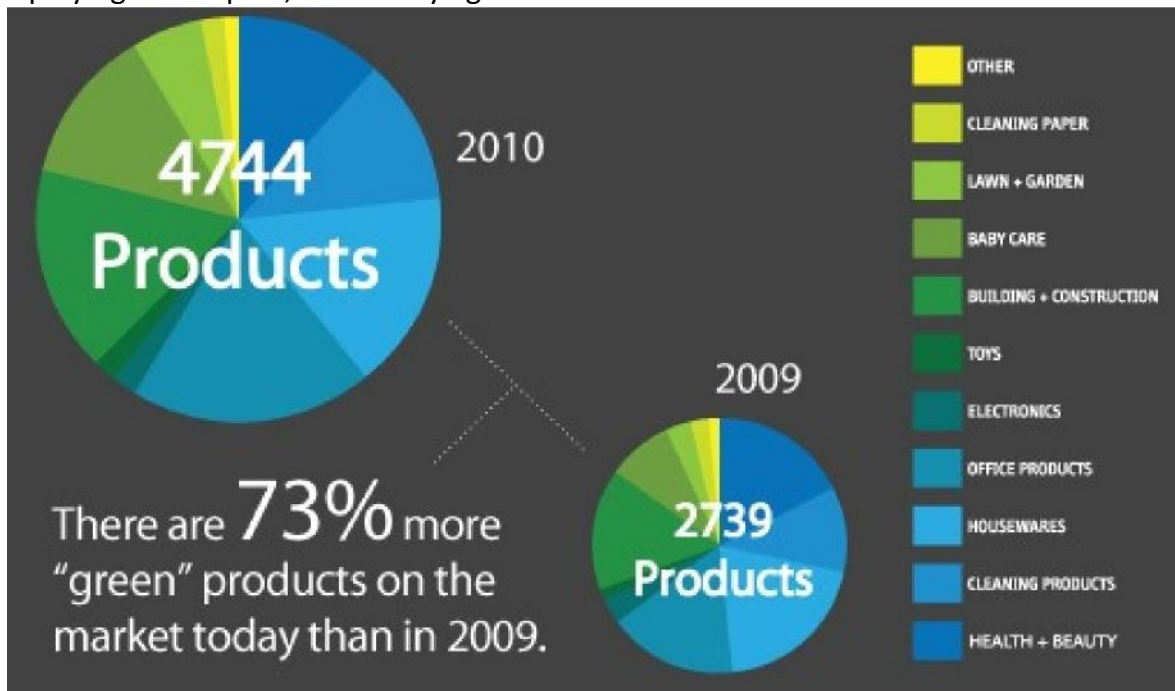
However, the eco-label is a powerful tool for good, one that places power in the hands of the consumers. By ‘consuming ethically’, the everyday shopper has the power to make real positive changes to products and how they are manufactured, and in so doing can reduce their impact on our planet. So, how is this wilderness to be navigated?

First we need to understand our terrain, we ask the obvious question:

**What is an eco-label?**

An eco-label is a market-based incentive, a motivation for the producer to produce a more environmentally-ethical or ‘-friendly’ product, for the retailer to source and stock such products, and a means to ease ethical decision-making for the consumer. The basic objective behind this is the introduction of environmental and ethical issues into the supply-demand rhetoric traditionally dominated by cost, aesthetics, usefulness and the like.

The array of labels can be separated into various categories based on what behaviour they incentivise; the first broad distinction is between social, health & safety and environmental concerns, with some, Fair Trade for example, straddling the boundaries. Further divisions can be made between which sectors the goods are bound for (see below). Beyond this, operational distinctions come into play; most notably, requirements for certification and verification methods. However, the consumer should have no need to delve into such complex issues as auditing, third-party verification, etc. or else the utility of the eco-label as a simplifying aid to quick, ethical buying is lost.



Source: <http://www.bbmq.com>

Conservation-based eco-labels particularly are becoming more prevalent and supporting conservation work by aligning with ever increasing interest in and need for conservation.

These labels play their part by informing public awareness and concern, and by providing a medium for the public to support conservation through the products they buy.

Some of the more familiar schemes are the FSC certification for supporting responsible, sustainable forest management (*more info: <http://www.fsc-uk.org/>*) and the Wildlife Friendly certifiers; in their own words, 'a global community dedicated to the development and marketing of products that conserve threatened wildlife while contributing to the economic vitality of rural communities' (*more info: <http://www.wildlifefriendly.org/>*).

The conservation research group 'Operation Wallacea' have created a new scheme called Wildlife Conservation Products, which "has great potential to substantially increase incomes in communities that are committed to protecting their adjacent forests and provides a market driven way of conserving forests". (*More info: <http://www.opwall.com>*)

### **How does this incentive work in the 'market place'?**

Market-based conservation seeks to mobilise and channel the private sector to contribute to the alleviation of environmental problems. The basic premise is that conservation issues become integrated into the cogs of supply and demand; this can be achieved by creating the *demand* for such products through engagement with and education of consumers, or from the opposite angle, *supply*, by pressuring supply chains and producers to make 'greener' goods and convincing retailers to stock them, thereby creating a supply. Quite often, the aim of the driving actor is to initiate both of these, turning both the wheels of supply and demand simultaneously. But how long can this last? More on this later.

Looking to the consumer perspective, the eco-label program operates on the key assumptions that the consumer is aware of the issues, *cares* about them and, crucially, alters their buying habits accordingly.

***Farming Futures state that '54% more consumers are buying environmentally responsible products than two year ago.'***

*(Source: Farming Futures)*

***The Ethical Consumerism Report 2010 found that expenditure on green goods and services grew 18 per cent over the past two years.***

*(Source: ECR 2010)*

## What is standing in the way?

Firstly, a mechanism with an outside driver generating both supply and demand begs the question of sustainability, or self-perpetuation; what happens when this driving force ceases? Does the eco-label continue, driven now by successfully raised consumer concern perhaps? Or do both supply and demand disintegrate concomitantly with the diminished driver, seeing consumers forget or get distracted, as producers embrace other marketing schemes, campaigns and more pressing issues?

The second concern is an issue already touched upon in this article, perhaps an issue many readers have detected in the supermarket aisles, an issue of confusion, and of trust.

The commitments that eco-labels entail must be appropriate to sustainable, environmentally sound practices; and the commitments be adhered to, implemented, verified, audited and maintained. The consumer should not be expected to scrutinize the eco-labels for this. But who will?

"Because certification is a self-regulated industry, the integrity of these labels varies wildly. The best certification systems have brought increased accountability to markets that used to be largely unregulated. Many others make environmental claims that cannot be proved."  
(Source [article: http://www.treehugger.com/files/2010/05/green-labeling-wars.php](http://www.treehugger.com/files/2010/05/green-labeling-wars.php))

Not only is the consumer over-whelmed by the sheer number of eco-labels, the resulting confusion is exacerbated by receipt of misleading or contradictory information, generating mistrust and worry amongst the public that products are green-washed to swindle them.

***"Survey finds 98% of eco-labels are guilty of green-washing."***

(Source & more info: <http://sinsofgreenwashing.org/findings/greenwashing-report-2009/>)

## Are eco-labels in danger of losing their credibility?

The consumer is presented with a barrage of ethical choices, eco-label claims vary in the breadth of products covered and in the strength and focus of their commitments; decisions are dogged by confused and contradictory information. The consumer is lost in a wilderness of ethics, sustainability and debate and cannot feasibly be expected to vet all the information, especially *in situ* wandering down the supermarket aisle.

The consumer is presented daily with an image of cornucopia through countless shelves that never empty; a fully-stocked fish counter bulging with an abundance of familiar and exotic fish stands in stark contrast to the celebrity chef (and rigorous scientific studies!) warning the world that the seas are emptying and fish stocks collapsing.

A market-based incentive, relying on consumers to buy ethically by simplifying their choice, should not be so bewildering.

This consumer confusion is a representation of what is happening behind the scenes; conflict between the vast array of stakeholders is generating the confused perceptions of the consumers. Producers, retailers, growers/farmers/fisheries, pack-houses, transporters, governments, regulators, lobbyists, NGOs, eco-labelers, independent certifiers and academics are all vying for the upper-hand in whatever their particular stake or agenda is; be it the better reputation, the higher profit, the good of the environment, the next contract, a stable market, a premium price, purchasing-power, an ethical supply chain, etc.

The 'wood wars' between the Forestry Stewardship Council and Sustainable Forestry Initiative provide an ideal case in point (if you are unfamiliar, read-up here: <http://www.treehugger.com/files/2010/03/rumble-in-the-lumberyard.php>) without becoming embroiled in the debate, it is a much-publicized case of two eco-labels with a weaker and a stronger standard squaring up against each other with a confused customer in between.

### **How can the consumer respond?**

When such eco-label controversies occur, as they will, I believe there are three potential outcomes. Happily, each of these outcomes simply requires the consumer to keep abreast of only the most major issues, and to continue to trust the eco-labels.

The first potential outcome we may see appearing on the market as green-buying continues to grow is an eco-label labeler. A 'certifier of certifiers'. An organisation could be borne out of an already well-established eco-label, already possessing credibility, sound reputation and customer recognition and trust, or a partnership of labeler(s) and NGO(s). This body would verify eco-label practices and claims, perhaps categorising and ranking them accordingly, using aids such as triage traffic-light systems or star-rating to encourage competition and improvement. The eco-label programme is thus capped at two labels per-product, the specific certifier who knows the product or particular industry details, and the 'eco-label labeler', who over-sees and checks their practices, encouraging higher standards and raising credibility. Already there is talk of such 'universal labeling systems' and standards;

"Global firms are demanding that the standards be (a) global in nature and (b) well documented, transparent and trustworthy... This has led to the emergence of "standards for standards" whereby the organizations setting voluntary eco-labels adhere to guidelines laid down by wider stakeholder bodies such as the ISEAL Alliance."

*(More info: [www.caelusconsulting.wordpress.com](http://www.caelusconsulting.wordpress.com) - what are eco-labels?)*

The second potential outcome may see eco-labels aiming ultimately to change regulations, as in other cases like organic food, thereby eventually guaranteeing the desired behaviour by legal requirement, and avoiding a label-saturated market. Current regulations exist in the form of the 'International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labeling Alliance' (ISEAL) (*more info: <http://www.isealalliance.org/>*) or ISO 14024- Environment Labels and Declarations Standard. However, to seek to expand and then roll out such regulations to cover the ambiguous, ethical and qualitative issues would be incredibly ambitious, though a piecemeal approach may work, however slowly.

The third outcome is already at work; simply allowing these eco-labeling discrepancies to work themselves out, relying on each of the competing stakeholders involved to serve as watch-dogs, quickly bringing to public attention any 'misbehaviour' from another stakeholder. Considerable pressure from within these complex structures of stakeholders is likely to balance out any dubious operators/practices, through media and bad publicity, law or other avenues. An example comes from the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), which faces much controversy from many reputable environmental groups.

Bustar Maitar, Greenpeace southeast Asia forest campaigner, "the RSPO has failed dismally to take up the challenge... 'Sustainable palm oil' continues to be a farce while RSPO stands exposed as a weak and ineffectual industry body." (*Source: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk>*)

Need the public become worried about these complexities? Is 'Joanne public' required to study these complex issues and debates if she wishes to purchase ethically? Undoubtedly it is important to be *aware* that behind some eco-labels there are questions of legitimacy. However, beyond that basic awareness, perhaps we can trust in our environmental watchdogs to duke it out and shut down or reform the errant delinquents of the eco-label world. Neatly, this goes some way to solving the first problem also, the drive behind the eco-label will be produced internally among the stakeholders so long as there is a need for an eco-label.

### **What can you do?**

Or, more accurately, what not to do: don't get lost in the eco-labels wilderness, and don't lose trust in them either. Eco-labels simplify informed decision making. Someone somewhere is doing the complex, well-informed decision-making, and the complex interplay of stakeholders for each eco-label serves as an internal balancing mechanism.

Simply paying attention to labels, especially on products you buy regularly, will suffice. Take a read of the box while you're waiting in the line, perhaps google it later.. or immediately if you have a 'smartphone'.. if there's any controversy it will quickly pop up.

The eco-label programme is a scheme in its infancy, already achieving some very positive results for the environment, and whilst it has its problems, it is not the role of the consumer to solve them. Already internal mechanisms and organisations are combating misuse of labels, poor standards or incompetence, whether it's regulators, NGOs, or other certifiers. Any dishonesty will quickly be unearthed; so have *faith* in the eco-label, but take things with a pinch of salt and inform yourself with the basics; it doesn't have to be *blind* faith.

### Still interested? Further reading:

- **“Completely confused by green labels? There’s an app for that...”**

[www.treehugger.com](http://www.treehugger.com) provided by [www.labellookup.com](http://www.labellookup.com)

- **Eco-label index:**

<http://www.ecolabelindex.com/>

- **For a head start on the new ‘wind-made’ label :**

<http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/152/tilting-at-windmills.html>

- **For even more, see links to online articles below:**

<http://www.treehugger.com/files/2010/11/the-green-workplace-looks-at-ecolabels.php>

<http://www.apartmenttherapy.com/la/green-ideas/7-ecolabelsdefined-057783>

<http://inhabitat.com/demystifying-eco-labels/>

<http://caelusconsulting.wordpress.com/2011/02/23/what-are-eco-labels/>

<http://www.biodiversityscience.com/2011/01/01/tackling-deforestation-ethical-scheme/>

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123862823846680371.html>

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/e0808bd6-436c-11e0-8f0d-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1GU051Uvd>

<http://www.treehugger.com/files/2010/03/rumble-in-the-lumberyard.php>

<http://www.jetsongreen.com/2010/03/crazy-wood-triangle-fsc-sfi-and-leed.html>