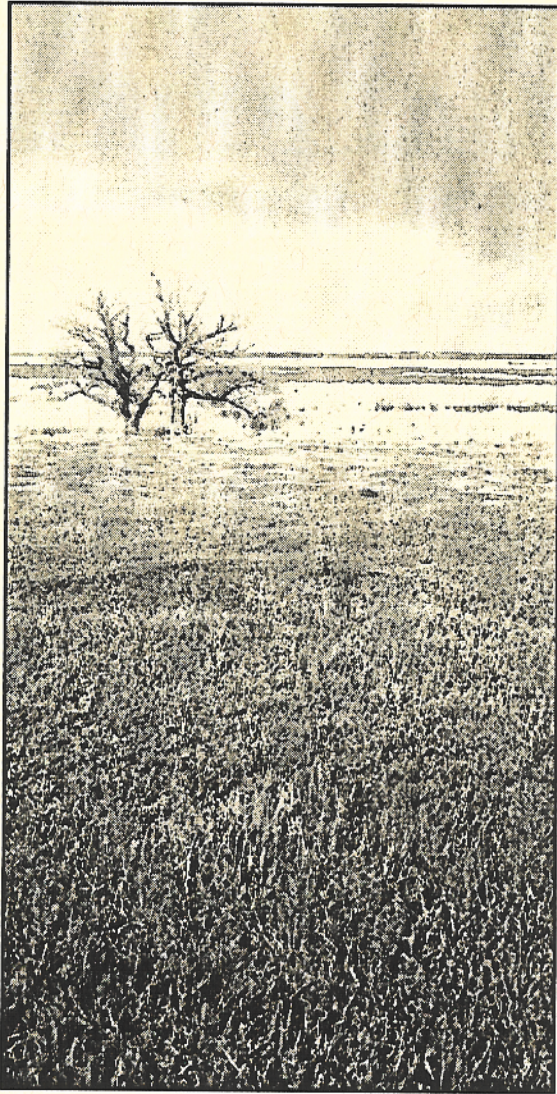


MEADOWLARK



Fall 1999

SO, HOW GREEN IS YOUR LABEL?

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Some time ago, in the United States, cans of tuna were labeled as "Dolphin Safe." Tuna and dolphins swim together in the Eastern Tropical Pacific, for reasons yet to be fully explained. Traditionally, tuna fishers in the Eastern Pacific use the presence of dolphins as a marker of the presence of tuna. Deploying their 1.2 mile-long tuna seine nets whenever dolphins were seen, fishers encircled the dolphins with the erroneous presumption that only the highly priced yellowfin tuna would be caught in the nets. As a consequence of this practice, six million dolphins were killed, and some populations were reduced to a mere 23% of their original size. Given the high profile of the case, the United States passed legislation that clearly stated that companies could only use the label "Dolphin Safe" on tuna cans if fishers caught tuna in a process that did not encircle dolphins.

Enraged foreign tuna-catching countries, such as Mexico and Venezuela, demanded changes in U.S. legislation...and got them. Incredibly enough, with strong support from Vice President Al Gore and the non-profit organization Greenpeace, rules on how many dolphins can be killed while tuna fishing were relaxed. Now the U.S. Commerce Department wants the label "Dolphin Safe" to be applied to all tuna. The Commerce Department claims that tuna fishing procedures that involve encircling dolphins "do not cause significantly adverse impacts" on dolphin populations.

This is a victory for tuna-catching countries that, according to documents from the State Department, spend hundreds of thousands of dollars every year lobbying to overturn any U.S. environmental legislation that could curtail them from killing dolphins. You may ask why these countries, that have so many economic troubles, so much unemployment and misery, spend so much money on an enterprise that only benefits a few. The question is: Who are these few? As it has been amply documented, owners of tuna fleets have strong ties with cocaine cartels that have penetrated the circles of the political elite of their countries.

No wonder the fleet owners have political clout and the full support from their countries' governments—when it comes to lobbying.

Now, Earth Island Institute, a non-profit, San Francisco-based organization, has sued the U.S. Government over the new U.S. interpretation of the "Dolphin Safe" label. We wish them the best, since the government should have no right to deceive American consumers just for the sake of "free trade."

More complicated, though, is the issue of other "environmentally friendly" labels. Al Gore, for example, is a person who was called, years ago, an "environmental crusader," but is now trapped in the "free trade" game. Currently, his position is that U.S. law should be written so it does not interfere with the country's "obligations" as a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The WTO is a secretive, business-oriented, multinational clique that specifically prohibits its members from engaging in trade barriers for environmental reasons. Gore has endorsed the return to killing dolphins on the premise that the numbers of dolphins killed during tuna fishing operations has been reduced significantly. Furthermore, to the dismay of many industrialized nations, Gore's position on global warming was a major obstacle in the establishment of the Kyoto Agreement—an agreement feared by U.S. energy corporations as it attempts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Also, Gore has tacitly supported the resuming of "aboriginal" (using GPS, high-power rifles, and walkie-talkies) whaling by the U.S. This is a dramatic change from the days when he was labeled as "ozone Al" by the far right. Actually, his environmental attitudes have changed so much that it is difficult to see what the difference is between him and his Republican counterparts. As Gore said to a group of business people a couple of months ago in California, businesses should vote for him because people *believe* that he is on the side of the environment. So much for the title of "environmental crusader."

More problematic, is to understand the position of Greenpeace, the quintessential environmental group that largely made a name by placing themselves between whaling ships and whales in inflatable boats. Greenpeace decided to side with the tuna fishers and promoted the "Panama Declaration," which aimed to "promote the conservation of dolphins AND tuna." Why did they do that? Although there have been many conspiracy theories trying to explain such odd behavior, my experience in dealing with Greenpeace has taught me two things. The organization tends to go "its own way" (i.e., No matter how unified the environmental movement is towards an issue, Greenpeace either takes a "unique" stance or simply doesn't join the vast majority opinion.

Somehow they think that must be different.), and there is no sense within Greenpeace of how to conduct business. In other words, the group knows as much about managing an environmental organization as a pig knows about Sunday. Inconsistency seems to be its motto. After Greenpeace dramatically increased its membership, while trying to save a couple of gray whales in Alaska years ago that were trapped in ice, the group is silent regarding the whale killing operations carried out by the Makah in Washington State. The Makah is an "aboriginal" whaling operation aimed at killing the very same gray whales Greenpeace was "saving" years ago in Alaska.

But issues of "green" labeling go well beyond Al Gore and Greenpeace. With the approaching 2000 elections, we will be bombarded by a plethora of candidates claiming to be "pro-environment" only to see that their records hardly support their claims. We tend to forget that political campaigns are expensive, candidates need strong financial support and they are more likely to obtain monetary resources from large corporations and PACs—i.e., "big money"—than from tree-huggers. The fact that political campaign contributions come from 4% of Americans casts serious doubts on the actual meaning of democracy. This is particularly true in these times when, besides some right-wing, fringe politicians, both Republicans and Democrats want to be in the political "center"—making both parties and their candidates almost undistinguishable from each other. Clearly, what we need in environmental and social terms in this country is not a third party (the Reform Party is not a party, it is a circus), but a second party.

Labels will not help you to make decisions. Remember that when politicians look at an issue they ask "How many votes can I get (or lose) from it?" And, politicians also know that taking an environmental stance plays well with the electorate, but badly with campaign contributors.