

Corporations hide behind an eco-mask

By Donella Meadows

MANY LARGE corporations have done a lot in the last few years to clean up their environmental act. No sector of the U.S. economy has increased its energy efficiency more than the industrial sector has. Large manufacturers are reclaiming and recycling wastes.

And of course they are spending millions of dollars on glorious ads, replete with images of green forests or the Earth from space, trumpeting their own ecological virtue.

"An old saying in business is that people have to look at the big picture. And the big picture today is that famous one of Earth rising, taken from the moon. Business has seen it, too. We get the picture."

That's the Mobil Corp., telling us how deeply it cares. The message would be more credible if it weren't spending millions more dollars, using other names, putting forth other messages that are underhanded and anti-environment.

One of the pioneers of corporate cover organizations was Keep America Beautiful. It was founded by purveyors of plastics and containers (Dow, DuPont, Procter & Gamble, Anheuser-Busch, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Seagrams). Its public purpose was to discourage littering. Its private purpose was to head off citizen pressure for bottle bills or other measures that would interfere with the profitable one-way flow of containers from companies to consumers to dumps.

A more recent example was the Information Council for the Environment, known as ICE. Founded by four coal companies and some coal-burning utilities, its goal was to cool down concern about global warming caused by burning coal. "If the Earth is getting warmer, why is Minneapolis getting colder?" asked ICE ads, which were targeted to "older, less-educated males and younger, lower-income women."

ICE meted down quickly, however. Its ads were roundly criticized by scientists, who pointed out, among other problems, that Minneapolis is not getting colder.

The Coalition for Vehicle Choice claims to be a "citizens' group" demanding the essential human right to drive gas-guzzling cars. Among the "citizens" who founded it were General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. Through the coalition they spent more than \$10 million last year to stop a law that would have raised the mileage of the average car to 40 miles per gallon.

The coalition's campaign was doubly successful. Not only did it defeat the fuel-efficiency bill, it also convinced the average citizen that higher mileage must mean less safety — although over the past 15 years, as car efficiency has doubled, highway fatalities have gone down.

The U.S. Council on Energy Awareness

is funded by uranium and nuclear power companies. It spends \$18 million per year (more than the total budget of the Environmental Defense Fund) "informing" the public that nuclear power will relieve the nation's dependence on foreign oil.

That claim is false — nuclear power makes electricity, only a small percent of U.S. electricity is made by burning oil. The Council on Energy knows that. I am one of many people who have told them so. They are not interested in truth; they are interested in promoting nuclear power.

Responsible Industry for a Safe Environment is a front for the National Agricultural Chemicals Association. Its purpose is to convince us that lawn chemicals are safe. It is working to defeat a bill that would require warning signs on lawns that have recently been sprayed with chemicals.

Citizens for Sensible Control of Acid Rain was formed in 1983 by coal and electricity companies, not citizens. Its propaganda exaggerated the costs of reducing acid rain and the jobs that would be lost. In 1986 alone it spent \$3 million lobbying against the Clean Air Act.

The Council for Solid Waste Solutions (plastics makers and users, including Ciba-Geigy, W.R. Grace, Chevron, Exxon, Dow, DuPont, Amoco, Phillips Petroleum, Procter & Gamble, Mobil) fights against bans on polystyrene and other packaging.

The American Council on Science and Health (NutraSweet, Exxon, Shell, Ford, General Motors, Ciba-Geigy, Monsanto, Union Carbide, American Cyanamid) exists to tell us that chemical additives and pesticides are not bad for us. The National Wetlands Coalition (Amoco, Arco, Chevron, Conoco, Exxon, Shell, BP America, Texaco, Kerr-McGee, Tenneco Gas) just scored a major victory by advising the White House staff on "revisions" to the Clean Water Act. These revisions opened half the nation's remaining wetlands to development and oil drilling.

Corporations may be winning battles through their covert "citizen" organizations, but they are losing the credibility war. As long as they hide and lie, manipulate and weasel, they undo all the official advertising in which they try to convince us of their good intentions.

Procter & Gamble's official advertising budget is \$1.5 billion per year. That is enough to fund the top ten environmental organizations six times over. If that corporation or any other has environmental news for us, it has ample means to tell us, straightforwardly, under its own logo. As long as it speaks to us in disguise, under false pretenses, we would be foolish to believe anything it says.

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