

AspEn

MAP Report 2:
Aspirational
Environmentalism

Extract 1

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The second MAP Report takes the greening of communication as its subject. Using unique visual analytic techniques and data resources, AspEn reveals the implications of environmental values on the future of marketing. The document sifts for real future trends and discards fads, providing a vital guide to how environmental concerns will drive new forms of advertising.

The MAP Report takes as its mantra that “everything that happens in the world

Makes A Picture” (MAP). Developed from the work of our global Creative Research team, the report is underpinned by analysis of the searches and choices of more than 1.5 million creative professionals on our website, as well as the review of thousands of tear sheets, commercials and other websites.

The following extract warns creatives and marketers of messaging and imagery they need to avoid, while identifying new positive, aspirational paths to follow.

Death to environmentalism:

Invent a new mythology

So far, we've seen the deep visual thinking behind "green" in our personal space, at home and beyond, and looked at some of the visual cues emerging in the visual language. What green means and looks like is currently a mix of the good, the bad and the bugly – yes, we will see more images of bugs!

But if it isn't the case already, we will soon be suffering not from neglect or denial of the environment, but from a sea of environmental messaging. "Greenness" will be the default position for clients and advertisers, which means we are heading into a period of opportunity and confusion, where everything will start looking like everything else. And despite some experts' claims, images of people hugging trees aren't the path for those seeking to avoid old clichés that will turn off consumers as quickly as the "pious Prius."

The death of environmentalism

Two environmentalists, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus published a seminal and controversial US liberal manifesto in October 2004

titled: "The Death of Environmentalism," it speaks of the denial at the heart of government and corporate policy, and reflected in the general public's lack of political will.

Shellenberger and Nordhaus note basic communication issues such as don't use the phrase "climate *change*" in the US, because Americans are inspired by the idea of change.



PhillyCarShare Prius, Pennsylvania, April 2004. 326664, William Thomas Cain

Likewise, be wary of using the phrase "global *warming*," because the word "warming" sounds good, and we've all made jokes about enjoying the summery climate a bit more. Most interestingly, the report notes a stage-like evolution of the green movement, from pursuing ideas of conservation, to a second wave of environmental regulation (of business), to the third, recent wave of investment in green businesses and technologies.



Death to environmentalism

When it comes to the visual language of the environment, we are in danger of killing it as a meaningful symbol with visual cliché. In fact, the first lesson we must learn in order to grab any attention, whether we are clients, advertisers or activists, is to make “death to environmentalism” our mantra. We must kill the clichés of ecology, dig up long-dead habits of mind and invent a new visual *mythology* of what it is to be ecologically sound. As we will see, we need “grit,” not “green.”

Mythologizing nature and the environment has an unfortunately shocking history. National Socialism in Germany was the last large-scale project that attempted to mobilize a population with the visual language and symbols of ecology and spiritualism, from ideas of “the fatherland” and “blood and soil” to borrowing such Eastern spiritual symbols as the swastika.

Even at the beginning of the 21st century, themes and images of nature remain powerfully compelling psychological forces, and the emotions they tap into are volatile. There are many countries

whose identity is bound up with mythologies around “land.” It’s no accident perhaps that the *Lord of the Rings* movies (originally a counter-myth to Nazi pseudo-folklore) has captured our attention in climate-troubled times.

There are two key elements to mythology and folklore:

1. They are ways of expressing shared, universal dreams.
2. They are also expressions of basic problem-solving, which is why the narrative arc of myths we’ve digested, from bedtime stories to Disney, are so familiar.

Visually, mythology can plug into the low-sheen, the off-the-shelf styling, the slightly amateur, what we called ... →

“We must kill the clichés of ecology, dig up long-dead habits of mind and invent a new visual mythology of what it is to be ecologically sound.”

Pollution-free communication

In order for green communications to connect with the bigger issues around climate change, which will increasingly set news agendas, this new visual mythology of greenness will not be rooted in fantasies of peasantry or exclusion. And in the short term, it's no surprise that the nonprofit sector is leading the visual language of green advertising, creating a style that is so far beyond anything else, it almost belongs in a different genre.

Communicators in these areas have advantages. In the charity or nonprofit sector, the message is simple. You don't have to sell benefits – it's often simply about awareness. Yes, it is simple, and that is exactly the point.

It's a lesson especially useful in the green area, where communications have gotten wordy, complicated and convoluted. The nonprofits educate in the language of brevity, recognizing the creative value of the cut. Green activists and politicians will point out the complexity of the green issue, and the tradeoffs and compromises we may have to make. Advertising is not the place for this, instead it should use the techniques typically associated with politics ...



High-impact, low-copy

These ads for Fondation Nicolas Hulot use an increasingly popular visual theme, kids signaling our future. What they also have a license to do is play on the classic advertising technique of creating fear to drive a need. Their effectiveness rests in their use of a single high-impact, low-copy communication. They cut through what Yankelovich calls the “mushiness” of attitudes.

Even the more copy-heavy Black Sea ads using uncomplicated photography work because of their directness. In visualizing green values, it's far better to be “clunky” and “naïve” than “sophisticated” and “shallow,” simply because consumers will be awash in green messaging. Plus, as our survey suggests, images of “water” will push buttons.



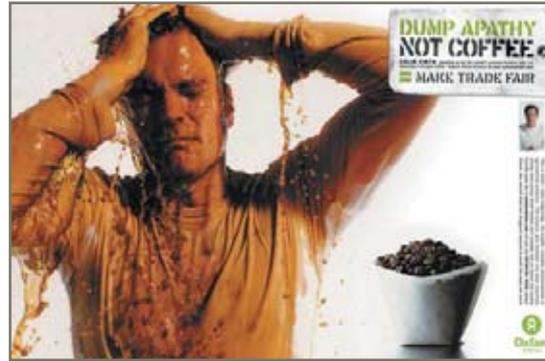
Nicolas Hulot Foundation, France
 Nicolas Hulot Foundation, France
 BSERP, Multi-country
 BSERP, Multi-country

Grit, not green

What's equally compelling about these Oxfam ads is not the barely recognizable celebrity, but the strong, hard-working images communicating the tactile experience of nature. As we have already pointed out, it's no surprise that "recycling" carries such weight among consumers. Recycling is a direct experience of ecology. And more importantly, it is a collective effort – people feel part of something bigger. In the world of green communications, being relevant doesn't mean niche marketing. It means people will commit to something if they believe others are also engaged.

The Oxfam campaign visualizes people getting their hands, heads, everything dirty. The rational message is that we don't want coffee, cocoa, or corn dumped onto Third World markets, destroying local agriculture. The deeper message is, "Get your hands dirty, get involved, don't fear physical nature." It's about not being a spectator.

In the first MAP Report, *One Life*, we discovered a desire among consumers for ad images that communicate the "grit" and "dirt" of everyday life. We predict this desire will be reshaped for green messages in a manner similar to these



Oxfam, UK

Oxfam images, which revel in a sense of the hands-on. The "dirty," "the mucky" call up a nostalgic childlike vision of nature, one that is culturally neutral, beyond the status politics of lifestyle.

Plus these experiential, tactile images are a positive invitation, an emotional counterforce to consumers' more general indecision about what to do, if anything, about climate change.

"The deeper message is, 'Get your hands dirty, get involved, don't fear physical nature.'"



Finally, consider campaigns that run a series of individual testimonies tapping into the desire for a sense of the collective will. The point isn't that consumers are indifferent or simply selfish, it's that they will only commit as long as others commit too. Especially when these others are actually a little like us. These are not "anti-celebrity" photographs, they are "anti-celebrity photographs."

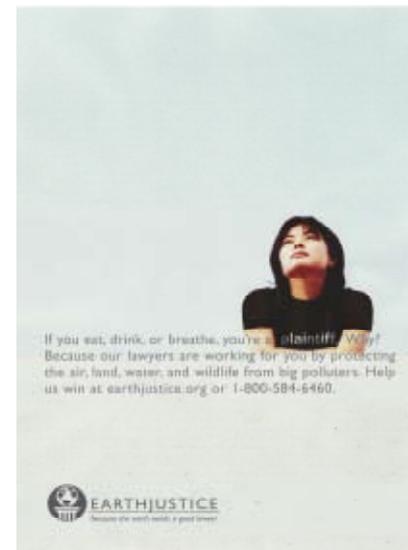
Without the filth and grime and grease, they would be classic celebrity photos, white background, for the Gap perhaps. This celebrity-photo remix humanizes with the style palette of "mess." The visual message of mess is incredibly effective,

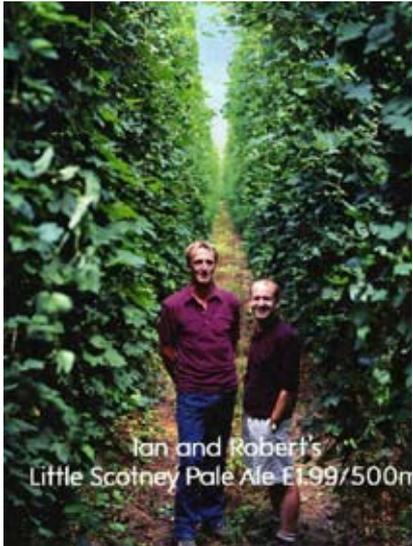
as it not only connotes a "humanity" beneath the art direction, styling and design (even though, of course, great messiness is the most difficult and most art-directed style), but that it introduces us to a wider concept of ourselves. Visually, mess gets a free pass because it depends on the idea that "underneath" we are all the same, and that's its emotional appeal. It talks to each of us as if we were part of something bigger, that "me-cycling" is part of "recycling."

Seek: Mess
Avoid: Sterile cleanliness

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Surfrider Foundation, France
Earthjustice, US
Stadt Heidelberg, Germany





The new stewards

Somewhere between brands or products promising to roll back climate change or trying to slipstream the green juggernaut with a spot of “forest” or “kelly” green, there is the new corporate persona of “stewardship.” Take as a case study the ads for the UK supermarket Waitrose. Their print ads have been photographically bold, simply showing a producer in the environment where the food is produced. The only copy is the produce and the price and the name of the supplier.

It blurs ecology with provenance and trust. And this is where marketers with a real story to tell about their product or brand will begin to forge powerful bonds with consumers. It's about trust – we see the individual, and the images are environmental portraits in the broad sense. They show the life of food before it is a consumer product, in the field, with the benign steward of nature looking on. They are beyond sentimentality – these environments aren't for looking at, they are for planting and growing and harvesting. It is a benign vision of nature.

Such direct images tap not only into wider public fears around “trust,” in who to

believe around climate change and its solutions, but also into trust in corporations. The visual and brand messaging is about the romance of the pragmatic, about the need for people to do things for themselves.

Waitrose, UK

Waitrose, UK

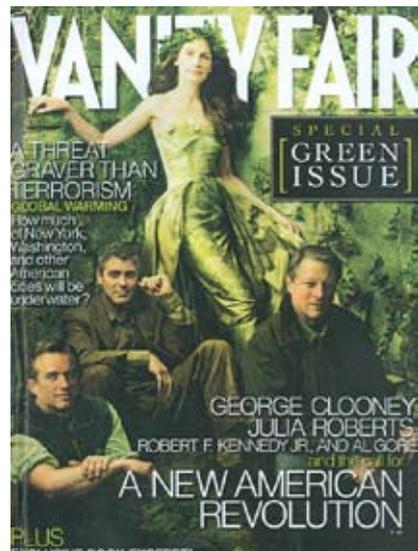
As we revealed in *One Life*, the figure of “Guru Joe,” the portrait of everyman/ everywoman, has a powerful appeal in a post-heroic age (seen in the international success of the TV series *Heroes*). The charisma of green marketing and advertising lies in an appeal to the ordinary rather than the utopian. No one is blind anymore to the awful, occasionally catastrophic, power of nature. →

“The ‘stewards’ are individuals beyond sentimentality – these environments aren't for looking at, they are for planting and growing and harvesting. It is a benign vision of nature.”

New myths

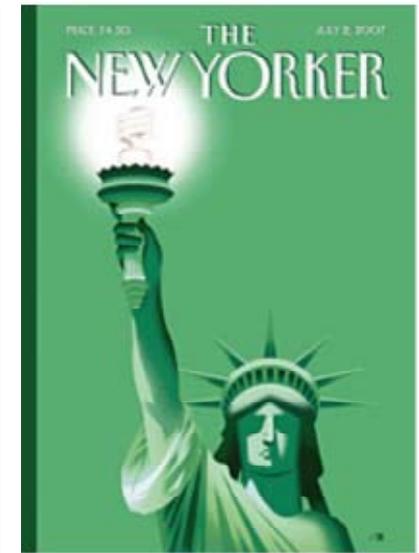
Photographers, advertisers and clients must kill old myths of nature before they kill us. There's no question that there will be a surfeit of visual clichés used of nature, some useful most not. We can't help being sentimental, and there's nothing wrong with that. It's just when it becomes the default visual language that it becomes a hindrance to good communication.

The countervailing force will be the visual language we are exposed to in the news. Whether natural disasters are due to global warming or not, we are



increasingly primed to see them in that way. Smart advertisers and clients will know that without a change in the visual language of the environment, there will be no conversation with consumers.

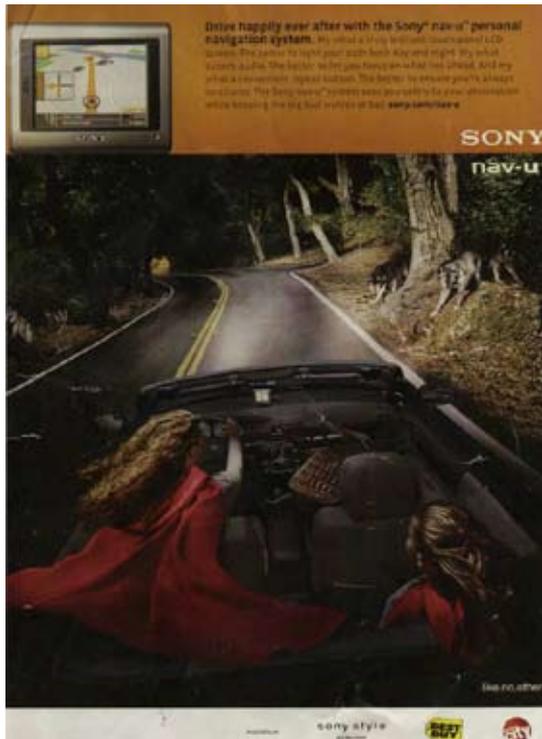
We need new folk tales, even if they are recycled fairy tales, because since childhood “nature” has been hard-wired into our imagination as mythic. We need new visual myths that give the pleasure of nostalgia in familiar icons or tales, but in modern contexts so we recognize their reality and unreality. By putting the traditional in the modern, we get the pleasure of time being out of sync in some way, which is exactly



where we are with climate change – no longer living the dream of being in control of nature.

Vanity Fair, May 2006, US
The Economist, US
The New Yorker, US

It's like the *Vanity Fair* cover featuring Julia Roberts as a woodland nymph, flanked by George Clooney and Al Gore, which gestures toward a new mythology, but it's not a grand enough gesture . It makes a fetish of nature. Or the *Economist* and *New Yorker* covers, which clearly recognize the need for a new green mythology, attaching it to an older mythology. Or Sony's sat-nav system deployed for modern Little Red Riding Hoods, who escape nature's terrors through technology. →



“Wrapping work in a green Pantone or using an image of a family picnic or rippling pool will go only so far.”

Wrapping work in a green Pantone or using an image of a family picnic or rippling pool will go only so far. But the invention of a new visual language is about revolutionizing the visual relationship between ourselves and a nature we no longer really know because it's changing so much.

One channel of the new visual language will simply be a visible exploration of green visual language, trying out new representations. A recent Alfa Romeo Spider ad takes on this space, showing a car journey that scales up and down between the hairs on a human arm and open fields, between the micro-life of the human body and the surrounding landscape. It's a road movie – but not as we know it.

Then there's exploration of “the unnaturalness of nature” in imagery. This has been happening in the culture for a while. In *Donnie Darko* (which has had a bigger half-life on DVD and TV); in music promos like *Bat for Lashes*; in the image-making of photographers such as Jeff Wall (whose global show gave him topical exposure) and Gregory Crewdson, who create open-ended mythic narratives; and, as we have discussed, in the kinds of imagery created in the Diesel campaign.

And as much as consumers associate nature with trees and forests, what they will respond to is something more playful and curious that neither preaches to them about saving the world or offers an Edenic vision of a Paradise that is well and truly lost.

We see three main areas where “green” will connect with resonant mythic impulses waiting to be tapped into →

Sony, US

Alfa Romeo, UK





(and you can see examples of these in the appendix):

1. Man vs. nature

There's no avoiding the fact that we are likely to be seeing more imagery of death and destruction in our news media. Whether this is actually due to climate change or not, it will be tagged by the news media as such. In creative imagery, therefore, we will

definitely see some imagery that alludes to the power of nature, to its stark power, to its ability to summon up mysterious, uncontrollable forces.

2. Hope + union

Similarly, we already see a desire for a kind of harmony with nature, a more mainstream need that goes beyond lifestyle niches. It's comforting, aspirational and exploratory. As the old

clichés about nature get blown away by events, we will be seeking new ways to understand and interact with a natural world that isn't as familiar as it used to be, and these new ways will lock onto the mystical and folkloric.

. JFB/Stone+

3. Time + future

Ultimately, all emotions around green issues map back to one concept – time. It's expressed in our experience of nature and the earth as something “timeless” that connects us, to the planet, to something vaguely “spiritual,” to previous generations, and of course, to the future. For this reason, we are likely to see more imagery of women and children, symbolizing nurturing and the future.

It's both about permanence and the passing of time, about continuity and change, nostalgia and the future – and that is the difficult balance that green communications need to work through.

This ends MAP Report 2, Extract 1.

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Extract 1

