

Greenpeace initially blamed more than eight western sports clothing brands for toxic substances being present in two Chinese rivers. It quickly focused on the three biggest brand names on the list, then two, then one.

adidas

Greenpeace has no problem with extrapolation to drive its Dirty Laundry detox agenda.

Shame is the name of the Greenpeace game

There is little doubt that the lobbying organisation Greenpeace has raised awareness of environmental issues in the mind of the wider public while it attacks governments and industries for not following its environmental agenda. In many cases, its campaigns have been justified and among them its protests against whaling stand out—whether or not its specific actions endangered life during its well-publicised protests. It would genuinely appear that there is no modern requirement for whale oil, corsets no longer need whale bone in their construction, and there is no shortage of meat among the remaining whaling nations of the world.

But there is also no doubt that Greenpeace suffers from some arrogance and does not appear to have the ability to ever admit that it might have been wrong or could be wrong. It has built up an international reputation, however, that seems to cow targets into submission. And the activists have no compunction in extrapolating their ideas into the far reaches of a supply chain in order to get others to submit to their demands. Collateral damage to employment and living standards in developing or impoverished communities does not often seem to concern the organisation.

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Dirty laundry in public

Greenpeace's most recent report 'Dirty Laundry' might be a case in point, as it targets the clothing industry and blames giant brands for pollution found in the Yangtze and Pearl deltas in China. Among its targets are major sports brands—adidas, Nike, Puma and Li Ning—but also Bauer Hockey, Calvin Klein, Converse, Lacoste and others.

Some of the pollution is alleged to have been caused by Zhejiang-based textile and apparel manufacturer Youngor Group but, it should be noted, the processes that could have caused the pollution are not used in the production of any garments for the major brands. Notwithstanding, Greenpeace is happy to blame the brands for the textile company's use of hazardous chemicals as, somewhere within the group, it has them as customers. One would have thought that Greenpeace would have focused all its firepower on the textile groups in question but this is not evident in the Dirty Laundry report. It could of course attack the governments of the provinces in which the allegedly guilty textile companies operate, or indeed the Chinese government for not adopting the standards on the use of chemicals, as covered by international agreement and, of course, the REACH regulations.

Given the efforts that the major global brands have made in recent years to promote clean, sustainable and socially responsible policies throughout the supply and retail structure of their companies, it is interesting that Greenpeace still sees them as softer targets. Given the high profile of the brands it is unlikely that they would knowingly use suppliers that do not meet the standards of responsibility that they impose today. The brands must also be fully aware of developments within the industry to avoid hazardous substances, and find alternative methods of production in the drive to greater environmental responsibility and sustainability.

Surely it doesn't require Greenpeace to target the brands and the chemical companies supplying the manufacturing industry worldwide; there is profit to be made out of corporate and social responsibility. Yet the lobbyists still try to name and shame companies in order to make them fall in line with the Greenpeace Dirty Laundry 'detox' agenda.

Quick response

It is to be applauded that Puma, the world's third largest sportswear brand, responded quickly to the Greenpeace challenge to detox, by publicly committing to the elimination of all releases of hazardous chemicals from its entire product lifecycle and across its global supply chain by 2020. But that is not enough and Greenpeace proceeded to try to shame Nike and adidas by stating that "Puma is now firmly ahead of its competitors".



Clear water. Puma has committed to eliminating all hazardous chemicals across its global supply chain by 2020.

Puma

Reading the abridged version of the Greenpeace Executive Summary on the findings of its report, there is not a word about any action it might take against the two Chinese companies that were scrutinised and analysed in order to prepare its Dirty Laundry report. From these two companies' operations it has extrapolated its findings into a global statement and appears content to tar everyone with the same broad brush.

The summary states that the investigations that form the basis of this report focus on wastewater discharges from two facilities in China. The first facility, the Youngor Textile Complex, is located on the Yangtze River Delta. The second, Well Dyeing Factory Limited, is located on a tributary of the Pearl River Delta. It goes on to state that the scientific analysis of samples found that both manufacturing facilities were discharging a range of hazardous chemicals into the Yangtze and Pearl River deltas.

Significantly, hazardous and persistent chemicals with hormone-disrupting properties were found in the samples. Alkylphenols (including nonylphenol) were found in wastewater samples from both facilities, and perfluorinated chemicals (PFCs), in particular perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctane sulphonate (PFOS), were present in the wastewater from the Youngor Textile Complex. This was despite the presence of a modern wastewater treatment plant at the Youngor facility. Many of the substances within these groups are, of course, regulated in 'the Global North', for example by the EU or by international conventions, the report states.

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Head to head

Following pressure from Greenpeace, Nike also announced a renewed commitment to eliminating hazardous chemicals from its supply chain. The sports brand said on August 17 that it would make sure that by 2020 its partners use no hazardous chemicals in any part of their operations.

Its announcement followed a similar commitment from Puma at the end of July. Both sports brands, along with Li Ning, Bauer Hockey, Calvin Klein, Converse, adidas and Lacoste, have featured prominently in the new campaign from Greenpeace to address the problem of toxicity in rivers in China.

At the time of the Puma announcement (July 26) , Greenpeace issued a press release taking adidas and Nike (although none of the other companies on the original list) to task for allowing a big rival to steal a march on them, as though the idea of asking outsource manufacturing partners to reduce and eliminate hazardous substances had never occurred to any of the three companies until hearing about the Greenpeace initiative.

After Nike, too, reiterated its commitment, the NGO turned all its ire on adidas (still ignoring the rest of the companies it named at the start of the exercise). It issued a new press release chastising adidas for failing to follow its rivals and even gloating over the victory of FC Barcelona (wearing Nike kit) over Real Madrid (adidas) in the Spanish Super Cup on August 17. "Greenpeace activists and local artists projected messages, including 'water pollution is not fair play' for the 100,000 fans at the Camp Nou stadium, before kick-off and after the final whistle," the organisation said.

In the same press release, its co-ordinator of the toxic water campaign, Martin Hojsik, said: "Not only has Nike triumphed over adidas's team in Barcelona, it's giving adidas a good thrashing in the Greenpeace 'Detox' challenge, by committing to cut hazardous chemicals discharges from its global supply chain. But losers shouldn't throw in the towel. Adidas must kick-off its comeback by not only committing to zero discharge but by also showing initiative and developing a new culture of transparency throughout the clothing industry."



An adidas store in Berlin. Greenpeace campaigners took to putting 'Detox' stickers on the company's shop-fronts.

adidas

Adidas has had a comprehensive restrictive substances policy in place for product materials since 1998. It has said it is committed to sustainable business practices in its own operations and those of its global supply base, and that it supports in principle Greenpeace's aspiration for a world that is free of hazardous chemicals. In a statement in July, the company added: "However, while we are committed to being part of the solution, we have to acknowledge that the management of chemicals in multi-tiered supply chains is a complex challenge, requiring many actors to play a role in achieving this goal."

Pressure continued over the summer and eventually, on the last day of August, a news statement from Greenpeace claimed the capitulation of the last of the big three sports brands. "Adidas has responded to the Greenpeace Detox Challenge by committing to zero discharge of hazardous chemicals throughout its entire supply chain," it said. Like Puma and Nike, it was committed already. Greenpeace says the big difference now is that the companies will have to "turn words into actions".

It also states that, regardless of what the aforementioned brands use these facilities for, none of these brands have in place comprehensive chemicals management policies that would allow them to have a complete overview of the hazardous chemicals used and released across their entire supply chain and to act on this information.

Sensitive to damage

The Greenpeace report clearly indicates that it is easier for the brands to create the change it seeks in a non toxic world than it, for all its grandstanding, can achieve. Others would say, however, that it targets the brands because they are sensitive to the damage Greenpeace can wreak by feeding its findings to the media and an uncritical reader. The fact that Greenpeace does not appear to be able to demand change at the polluters' level or that of local government could be considered revealing.

One must 'extrapolate' that it expects the brands to have their own chemical laboratories and scientists. On the other hand, perhaps it might be a whole lot more responsible if Greenpeace sought to cooperate and work with the brands rather than simply adopt 'a name and shame them' policy.

The effects of collateral damage does not seem to be of much concern but anything that might affect a balance sheet clearly has an attraction.

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