PLENTY
THE WORLD IN GREEN

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Monkeying with the message

How can we change not only our nation's climate policy but our environmental behaviors, too? The answer is not as splashy as you'd think - and it might involve primates and shopping.

Illustration by Thomas Fuchs

Late last September, Mike Hughes was having breakfast with Al Gore at a midtown Manhattan hotel. "It's kind of a heady experience to sit across the table from him," says the president and creative director of the Martin Agency, an advertising firm famous for its Geico cavemen and talking lizards. Together with Cathy Zoi, CEO of Gore's Alliance for Climate Protection, and Hughes' colleague Chris Mumford, Gore and Hughes were discussing the $100 million ad campaign the Martin Agency is developing for the Alliance. The campaign is still in development but is due out in the next few months. Its primary aim: to point voters to public policy solutions for the looming climate crisis. "Right now," Hughes says, "we have incredible numbers of people in the US who say global warming is an important problem that needs to be fixed. But most people think there's nothing they can do about it—or that someone should do something about it, but that someone isn't them."

The Alliance and the Martin Agency are hoping to make climate change a major issue in the upcoming presidential race. "Even though people think climate change is important," Hughes notes, "it's not one of the top three issues that people cite when talking about their choices for president." Public policy isn't the only focus of the ad campaign, though. The Alliance is also hoping that in conjunction with what it's calling "community partners" across the nation, it can inspire significant changes in Americans' environmental behavior: in the ways we drive; heat, light, and cool our homes; wash our laundry; and buy our food. Such changes could have a tremendous worldwide impact on the environment. After all, we Americans are among the worst polluters on earth, responsible for approximately 26.5 tons of greenhouse gas per person every year, not to mention a host of persistent pollutants, toxic chemicals, solid wastes, and other environmental offenses. Our greenhouse gas production alone is three and a half times the world average and at least twice that of most of Europe.

At their meeting, Hughes tried to absorb all that Gore was telling him: The polar ice caps scientists thought might last 50 years may now survive only 10 or 20 more; severe droughts, floods, and heat waves are already taking their toll, especially in poor and low-lying places across the globe; and more species are being lost now than ever before in history. It was a lot to take in over omelets.

The conversation Gore and Hughes had in that Manhattan hotel is one that everyday American environmentalists have often, too. How can we change not only our climate policy but our environmental behaviors as well? Making significant efforts to curb our production of greenhouse gases and other detrimental habits is key to a livable future here and in places where the American lifestyle has become an enviable model.

There are good reasons to believe, however, that many such campaigns—the Alliance's included—may well come to naught. Not because the Martin Agency's advertising

expertise is in any way lacking, or because the Alliance won't be able to accurately depict the urgency of the crisis. And certainly not because certain government officials and grassroots organizations aren't trying hard enough. But the agency might come up dry because we as a nation seem almost immune to such efforts. In fact, study after study shows that the majority of interventions aimed at improving environmental behavior—advertising included—demonstrate few, if any, long-term benefits.

Does this mean we're doomed to continue our planet-destroying ways? The clock ticks loudly for activists. "Mike," Gore declared to Hughes that bright September morning, "we cannot fail. We cannot fail."

In March 2007, the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy released the results of its annual poll measuring Americans' attitudes toward the environment. Here's the very good news: 83 percent of those surveyed believe that global warming is a serious problem—the majority label it "a very serious problem." That's up from 74 percent who identified it as "serious" in 2005.

According to the poll, Americans are believers in the power of individual action and in the ability of regular people to make a difference. When asked, "Which group or person would be most effective at improving efforts to reduce emissions connected to global warming?" 27 percent chose consumers. (Big business and Congress followed closely; the president came in at a lowly 10 percent.) But for all of their belief in the power of one, in the very same poll, 46 percent said they would seriously consider buying an SUV, up from 42 percent in 2005.

How can Americans, who express pro-environment sentiment in the polls, engage in such anti-environmental behavior? And what can those hoping to change their habits learn from these facts?

To begin with, say those who study environmental behavior, let's do away with the idea that most people are rational actors who learn information and translate it into behavioral change. Instead, "it's good to see every person as consisting of two people—a citizen and a consumer," says Halina S Brown, professor of environmental science and policy at Clark University in Massachusetts.

The citizen is the one who voices the aspirations and awareness we find in surveys like the Yale Center's. The consumer, who inadvertently damages our ecosystems with SUVs, air travel, and unsustainably sourced foods, is by contrast, says Brown, "a member of society and culture, and is subject to a different set of influences."

Prominent among these influences is one seemingly hard-wired into human beings and other primates: the desire to demonstrate refined social status. In a famous 1982 study by UCLA neuroscientist Michael McGuire, high-status monkeys who lost their social standing to others in their group experienced rapidly plunging levels of the mood-elevating and -stabilizing brain chemical serotonin. Those whose status rose experienced concurrent serotonin gains. In other words, being on top and having others know it makes you feel better; falling in status, and having others witness that, feels like crap.

And while a human's brain chemistry is probably a bit different than a monkey's, it's no wonder that many of us are driven to constantly prove our status by possessing more and more. After all, few things say, "Hey, I can afford it," like a $60,000 Cadillac Escalade with its $3,500 annual fuel bill. Conversely, environmentally preferable options like living in a smaller home or taking public transportation have, at least to date, marked you as a loser.

Besides this primal urge, we're driven to consume for other reasons: to impress potential mates, to express love and affection, to communicate our individuality. No matter how bad it is for the planet, Brown says, "We consume a lot because, in our society, that's what people do."

There's another hindrance of environmentally responsible behavior that needs to be taken seriously: Economically, doing the right thing is often much more difficult and expensive, at least in the short term. Take energy-efficient windows for example. Installing them can cut the average American household's carbon emissions by more than a ton and a half each year. But unless your local building code requires them—and most don't—you first have to be aware that they exist, then spend a lot of time and money getting them installed. "It's at this level that we need to be thinking," explains Canadian environmental psychologist Doug McKenzie-Mohr. "Unless we remove barriers to people acting in ways that are environmentally effective, it's not surprising that people are going to make irresponsible choices."

Because, whether we're citizens or consumers, lab monkeys or human beings, living green must come easy or most people won't do it. Right now, though, that easy green thing isn't happening too often. So what can help people get over the hump and embrace the idea of doing what's right?

Practice, McKenzie-Mohr says. When people who are not particularly environmentally aware or inclined start doing something that's good for the environment—like, say, participating in a curbside recycling program—they often begin to think of themselves as being concerned about the fate of the earth. "People's perceptions of themselves are often driven by their behavior," McKenzie-Mohr explains. That new self-concept can then spur further pro-environment behaviors.

Creating an environmental sense of self through regular practice is a core teaching of the nation's most successful environmental education program, designed for adults and children. At the Teva Learning Center in the rolling hills of western Connecticut, about 1,200 fifth and sixth graders from Jewish private schools come every year for three- to four-day visits to study ecology and traditional religious teachings on the environment. Their instructors are cool 20-somethings in hiking boots and wooly, crocheted yarmulkes.

Teva—the name means ark in Hebrew—is a total-immersion environmental experience where kids explore the smells and textures of trees and learn how all energy originally derives from the sun. Games like the psolet (which means waste in Hebrew) contest teach environmental awareness.

Before the kids' first meal at Teva, the students are told they can eat as much as they want. They can come back for seconds or thirds even, but they should try not to create too much psolet. After each meal, the leftover food is collected in a bucket and ceremoniously weighed to the chorus of Queen's "We Will Rock You," banged out on dining hall tables. (Teva's resident goats enjoy the spoils.) The goal is to have the kids produce less psolet as their visits progress. By the last lunch at a session this fall, 45 kids produced less than a pound of waste collectively, a new record.

Teva kids also devise and sign a covenant with the earth called a Brit Adamah. It's a commitment to perform a chosen environmental action for six weeks. Whether it's becoming a vegetarian, taking shorter showers, or not having an XBox, Wii, TV, and computer all plugged in and turned on simultaneously—it's more practice at doing the right thing. The Brit also promotes another environmental behavior change: the pledge. Studies show that people who sign pledges—and the actual signing of a piece of paper seems to be important, rather than simply speaking a verbal oath—are far more likely to follow through on their commitments. After six weeks, the students can send their pledge cards back and receive a prize: an earth-shaped bead to wear on a necklace with other beads, each representing an environmental subject they mastered at Teva. Jonathan Dubinsky, Teva's program director, estimates that 70 percent of the kids complete their covenants. "I think kids really connect to the idea that when a bunch of people work together, we can really accomplish a lot," he adds.

But there's probably more going on as well. Thinking about how one's behavior impacts the environment becomes the community norm, even for students with little or no prior environmental awareness. The act of reading their pledges aloud to classmates and teachers makes the kids accountable to each other. Moreover, all this pro-environment behavior is modeled by those cool (read: high status) Teva teachers, whom all the kids love.

Without the goats or psolet scales, the *Low Carbon Diet* program—that's carbon, not carbs—is trying to do for adults what Teva does for kids: offer environmental education, create community norms, share information, and provide group reinforcement. Indianapolis area residents who attend "Living Lean and Green" lectures at their local library are recruited into Carbon Diet's groups, which promise big changes: "Lose 5,000 pounds in 30 Days!" The program, pioneered by David Gershon of the Woodstock, New York–based Empowerment Institute, is modeled on one of the few environmental interventions that studies show has produced long-lasting environmental behavior changes: The EcoTeam program.

EcoTeams bring together neighbors, friends, club members, or coreligionists for six to eight monthly meetings, where they learn and track behaviors that will improve their impact on the environment. The meetings tackle topics such as garbage, energy use, transportation, and consumer behavior.

A three-year Dutch study that followed demographically similar EcoTeams and control groups found that EcoTeam participants "changed half of the 38 household behaviors examined, with corresponding reductions on four physical measures of resource use." Moreover, EcoTeam participants maintained or improved their pro-environmental behaviors for two years after group meetings ended.

"When you bring together a group of individuals," McKenzie-Mohr say about EcoTeams' success, "you have a much higher likelihood of being able to address barriers because of pooling of knowledge. At the same time, you

have the opportunity to create a new social norm, and you have a lot of social support."

In Indianapolis, "the *Low Carbon Diet* [movement] is making global warming a front-burner issue," says Paul Chase, who manages the program for the area's Citizens Action Coalition Education Fund. There are two *Low Carbon Diet* groups of eighteen members and ten Living Lean and Green workshops scheduled for the spring.

That might not seem like a lot. But Indianapolis is in the heart of coal country. The city of not quite 800,000 doesn't even offer recycling in most neighborhoods. Indiana has one of the highest rates of CO_2 emissions per capita nationwide. As a result, Chase says, "I've really been surprised at the level of participation. The program has developed a life of its own."

The strength of this small-group interaction is something Gershon intends to build on with the help of green cleaning-and-household- products manufacturer Seventh Generation. Together, they hope to roll out the *Low Carbon Diet* nationally through a project Gershon calls Cool America. "The *Low Carbon Diet* is easy and really well done," says Gregor Barnum, director of corporate consciousness at Seventh Generation. When the diet was introduced in 2000, the Portland, Oregon, residents who participated cut their household emissions by an average of 6,700 pounds, an enviable weight reduction by any standard.

Whether mass media advertising, like the kind the Alliance for Climate Protection intends to deploy, can effectively motivate large groups of Americans is a question that's open for much debate. McKenzie-Mohr cites a $26 million anti-global-warming ad campaign in 2004 sponsored by the Canadian government that auditors later found did nothing to change viewers' environmental behavior. "It didn't tackle the significant barriers that exist to behavior change," McKenzie-Mohr notes.

Brown agrees with McKenzie-Mohr on advertising's drawbacks. "I don't think advertising alone leads us to deep learning," she says—the kind of learning that changes the way we see ourselves and interpret the world; the kind of learning that can release our inner primates from cycles of destructive consumption. If there's a place for advertising in environmental-behavior-change campaigns, McKenzie-Mohr says, it's "to sketch out what a sustainable future is going to look like and why it's preferable to where we are now."

Gore's Alliance, however, has great hopes that its advertising will lead people to see themselves as participants in the fight against climate change. "We're confident, and the [former] vice president is confident, that this is a unique moment," says Alliance communications director Brian Hardwick. "There are plenty of examples of social marketing that have created significant changes in behavior and policy." Hardwick cites the famous early-1970s People Start Pollution, People Can Stop It campaign featuring actor "Iron Eyes" Cody as a Native American, and studies show that the more recent Truth campaign made a significant dent in teen smoking.

Will the Alliance's campaign work? Only time will tell. But in our efforts to bring a halt to environmental destruction that threatens us all, let's not forget the things we know work for sure, like developing real-world social networks where green is the norm. School children are our natural allies. So are green movie stars, green pro-wrestlers, and green mega-church pastors driving plug-in hybrids.
And remember: Nothing says, "Hey, I can afford it," better than one of those $1,375 reusable shopping bags that high-end retailer Barneys hawked at Christmas. If you got one as a gift or bought one with your own hard-earned cash, then flaunt it. In this environment, status matters.