

## Eco-Fads: Bad for the Economy, Bad for the Environment

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In the book *Eco-Fads*, Todd Myers — environmental director of the Washington Policy Center and adjunct scholar with the National Center for Policy Analysis — dissects with laser precision the incentives and motivations that lead such seemingly disparate interest groups as environmentalists, politicians, certain business people, and the press to promote eco-fads: trendy environmental causes which often have little to do with actually protecting the environment and in fact usually result in environmental harm due either to a misunderstanding of the problem or an application of flashy, visible, popular but mistaken “solutions.”

Myers lives in a hotbed of environmental activism — the great Northwest. As he details in the latter part of the book, the Northwest has been at the heart of many of the nation’s most visible public battles over the environment: the spotted owl controversy, alar and apples, green energy and green buildings. In a series of case studies, Myers examines the real issues that served as the kernel of truth out of which grew ecofads that came to dominate press coverage and public-policy proposals — to the detriment of developing positive solutions to the underlying issue. Myers brings a wealth of inside knowledge to bear on issue of ecofads. Prior to his work at the Washington Policy Center, Myers served on the executive team at the Washington Department of Natural Resources — he was there on the ground, talking to the reporters, interacting with environmentalists, and answering politicians’ queries and requests. This experience lends his accounts of the controversies — and descriptions of the participants and their various points of view and internal motivations — an authority that someone writing from the ivory tower of the academy just doesn’t have.

What’s an eco-fad? Quoting Myers:

Eco-fads combine three elements. First, they are personal, reflecting the worthiness of the consumer or policymaker choosing the fad. Second, they are popular, demonstrating to others that the person making the decision is environmentally responsible. Finally eco-fads are, at some level, phony. They fail to achieve the goal supporters claim to want, creating more negative environmental effects than benefits.

Myers is not, as many environmentalists portray conservatives or others who sometimes raise objections to popular environmental trends, “anti-environment.” Indeed, he displays early and often in his book a nuanced concern for real environmental problems and presents an array of possible policies that would improve environmental quality while helping humans prosper in the

process. As Myers notes, “(t)ruly protecting the planet for future generations is an important goal.” One that requires a scientific understanding of the areas where humans are doing damage, how the damage is being caused, how bad the problem is, and, in a world of scarce resources including time and manpower, how great a particular problem is compared to other possible problems. Myers argues that “real environmentalism is based in a desire to use resources responsibly and reduce the waste of money and resources. And yet eco-fads do just the opposite, often they waste money on efforts that at best produce no environmental benefit and at worst actually cause harm. While not all popular environmental issues or policies are eco-fads, too many are.

One of the defining characteristics of an eco-fad is that it is sold or pushed not based on what it does for the environment but about what it says about those following the fad: Do others share my concern? Do they praise me for my environmental concern? Does it make me feel good about myself? One eco-fad he dismantles is the green building craze. He shows in multiple instances that green buildings, contrary to the claims of promoters and the expectations of politicians and the general public, often don’t save energy, nor do they improve worker/student health or performance. At one speaking engagement, when Myers presented data outlining the large amount of energy used by supposedly “green” buildings an audience member interrupted Myers presentation; pounding his fist on the table he announced that what Myers was saying was “Immoral!” When the audience member was asked if it was moral to promote policies that don’t save energy, he said “I’m not going to address that.” That, of course, was the very point at issue — but for that fad-follower, questioning the value of green buildings was tantamount to questioning his values.

There is not a chapter in the book that readers won’t learn from. Consider the chapter detailing the extent to which journalists promote eco-fads — not only determining the stories they choose to cover but the manner in which they do so. Journalists covering a firebombing of an urban development by the terrorists group the Earth Liberation Front, for example, rather than highlighting the harm caused by the act —the resources wasted, the personal losses — chose instead to write an apologia for the group, focusing on their noble motives. For these journalists, what ELF did was “wrong,” but it was for a good cause and served to make people think about development. In a not-too-subtle way, the coverage ended up rewarding ELF for the terrorist act, and is tantamount to the encouragement of future crimes.

In the end, there are too many great examples in this book to cover them all in a short review. If one wants to understand how we got where we are today with environmental politics — where “solutions” don’t solve much but rather cause more problems than they solve; why everyone feels good about doing good for the environment despite the fact that little good is actually accomplished despite enormous expense — then this is the book to read. If some dedicated environmental leaders or activists would read Myers book with an open mind, they might end up promoting personal behaviors and public policies that accomplished far more for the environment than their current courses of action.