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Talking Trash: Behind the Tobacco Industry's "Green" Public Relations

May 2022

In November 2021, a major transnational company celebrated twenty years in the Sustainability Index run by Dow Jones.¹ In a glossy video to celebrate the achievement, its branded yacht sails through crystal blue waters. In the background rousing music plays.²

This celebration is not a one off: Elsewhere the company claims it achieved a "gold standard" in another index of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting.³ It has also won an award for being a climate leader from the Financial Times.⁴ At an influential investor event in February 2022, the company devoted slide after slide to its ESG achievements, including one slide dedicated to all the recent ESG awards it had won.⁵ The carefully crafted message to financial analysts, the media and policymakers is simple: This is a company that has global recognition for its commitment to people and the planet.

Nor is it alone in its sector. One of its main competitors was recently awarded "A-List" status in a sustainability index for the fifth year in a row by the Climate Disclosure Project (CDP).⁶

You would be forgiven for thinking that these companies were truly global sustainability leaders, making sustainable products. But you would be wrong. The first company is British American Tobacco (BAT) and the second is Philip Morris International (PMI). They are two of the world's largest transnational tobacco companies, which are part of an industry whose main products kill one in two long-time users, contributing to more than 8 million deaths per year.⁷

Whilst we have known for decades that tobacco is harmful to health, the ecological impact of the tobacco industry is often overlooked. Tobacco also causes significant ecological impact along the whole lifecycle of a cigarette from deforestation to water usage to disposal.

At every step of production, the tobacco industry has an impact on the environment.

All tobacco companies promote their ESG rankings and accreditations. All four of the world's largest tobacco companies, BAT, PMI, Japan Tobacco International (JTI) and Imperial Brands, feature the CDP and other environmental rankings prominently on their websites. They know what they are doing:⁸ Their message implies they are truly sustainable. Yet there are three dirty secrets to these kinds of ranking schemes:

1. Sustainable investment analysts have warned that ESG criteria generally do not consider the sustainability of the company's actual core product or services at all, instead focusing on how a company operates, rather than what it actually does. This means that tobacco can score "perversely" highly.⁹ As Tobacco Free Portfolios points out: "the core purpose and impact of the business is not necessarily considered amongst the ESG or sustainability factors."¹⁰ Therefore ESG awards typically ignore the unique harm and deadliness of tobacco products.¹¹ Furthermore, tobacco companies typically are not evaluated against truly sustainable companies, only against each other.
2. Companies are also able to take advantage of the fact that there is no single, globally agreed protocol for assessing companies' ESG activity. Worldwide, there are over 600 different ESG approaches with no harmonization.¹² And as there are no standardized disclosure requirements for ESG reporting, tobacco companies could be free to share only the sustainability data that paints them in a positive light.
3. Tobacco companies are also free to set their own sustainability goals, with little or no external scrutiny. When a goal is not met, a company can simply choose not to report it, and even drop it moving forward. If one ESG accreditor gives them a poor assessment, companies can simply withdraw their participation in that accreditation scheme. For example, when BAT, JTI and Imperial Brands received poor ratings from CDP Forestry on disclosure and impact in 2017, all three opted out of the scheme.¹³

The way the industry uses these so-called "sustainability awards," when the scheme portrays them in a good light, is a classic case of greenwashing.

What is greenwashing?

More than twenty years ago the Oxford English Dictionary added the concept of greenwashing, defined as: "Disinformation disseminated by an organisation as to present an environmentally responsible image."

In the decades since, greenwashing has been employed by the most polluting or controversial industries on the planet, including tobacco. It could be argued that the tobacco industry has attempted to greenwash its reputation and products through programs such as beach clean-ups, and funding environmental and disaster-relief organizations. This practice is especially true in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) that tobacco companies target to increase sales and profits.

In recent years, as the tobacco industry has tried even harder to rehabilitate its image, the evidence suggests its greenwashing activities and promotion has increased.¹⁴ For example, between 2014 and 2020, PMI spent over US \$13 million funding environmental projects and so-called corporate social responsibility (CSR) around the world. This funding has been spent mostly in Asia, Latin America and Europe. In contrast, very little funding has been granted to African countries, who are most in need of help and where many tobacco farms are located.¹⁵ Most projects have focused on raising awareness on cigarette butt littering and disaster relief.¹⁶ Over the same period, the company had a profit equivalent of over US \$180 billion.¹⁷

Some specific examples of tobacco industry greenwashing include:

- Since 2011, BAT has been involved with the Brazilian Tobacco Growers Association, the Brazilian Institute of Environment and the Ministry of the Environment for the preservation of forests on the south coast of the country.¹⁸
- In West Africa, PMI undertook Project Waterfall for access to water in Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal to help greenwash its image.¹⁹
- In India, Imperial Brands funds education, sanitation and health through its leaf partnership with Alliance One in the Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh, including environmental education through a local NGO called PROTECT.²⁰

- Also in India, for World Environment Day in 2018, ITC, the largest Indian tobacco company, claimed to be "water positive," "carbon positive" and "solid waste recycling positive" for "over 14 years," implying the company was having a net benefit on the environment.²¹
- In Bangladesh, BAT Bangladesh brags that it has received the "Prime Minister's National Award" four times for its afforestation project,²² despite the fact that tobacco growing is a leading cause of deforestation, especially in LMICs.²³
- In February 2022, U.K.-based Imperial Brands issued a press release saying it had been recognized as a "global leader" for engaging its supplies on strategies to combat climate change.²⁴
- Altria, the U.S. tobacco company, funded so-called CSR projects in the United States including the initiatives Keep America Beautiful, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Center for Watershed Protection.²⁵

This kind of activity gives the impression that the tobacco industry is socially and environmentally responsible. Yet this industry is causing an incalculable toll on health to smokers, non-smokers and farmers.²⁶ And not only is tobacco harming humans, it is also damaging the environment.

The ecological impact of tobacco and nicotine products

Whilst we have known for decades that tobacco is harmful to health, the ecological impact of the tobacco industry is often overlooked. Tobacco also causes significant ecological impact along the whole lifecycle of a cigarette from deforestation to water usage to disposal.

At every step of production, the tobacco industry has an impact on the environment. Every year, 32 million tonnes of tobacco leaf is grown to produce some six trillion cigarettes.²⁷ Scientific studies have shown that this emits and uses over 80 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) equivalent. Annually, about 22 billion tonnes of water are used in tobacco production globally, often in countries where water supply is already stressed.²⁸ This is the equivalent of about 8.8 million Olympic-sized swimming pools.

Scientific studies have also shown that the entire product lifecycle of a single cigarette has a climate change contribution of up to 14 grams of CO₂ equivalent.²⁹ Tobacco growing and curing are also both direct causes of deforestation. An estimated 1.5 billion hectares of (mainly tropical) forests have been lost worldwide since the 1970s, contributing to up to 20% of annual greenhouse gas increases.³⁰

About 4.5 trillion cigarettes butts are discarded each year worldwide, making them the most littered item on Earth, and the most frequent item of litter on beaches.³¹ Moreover, recent research published by the Truth Initiative shows that the chemicals that leached from a single cigarette butt (soaked for 24 hours in a liter of water) released enough toxins to kill 50% of the saltwater and freshwater fish exposed to it for 96 hours.³² Even with such statistics, with relatively few comprehensive studies undertaken, the true environmental impact of tobacco is unknown.³³

As more and more tobacco companies also start producing newer nicotine and tobacco products, such as nicotine pouches, e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products, a whole new set of problems, including electronic waste, is set to exacerbate the industry's huge ecological impact. These products will not only keep consumers addicted to nicotine, they also will create a whole new ecological crisis, from mining for battery components, to the manufacturing of plastics, to the disposal of "vaping pods," and electronic devices, some of which of course also need electricity to function.³⁴

For example, one academic paper in 2019 noted: "New classes of plastics, metals, cartridges, lithium-ion batteries, and concentrated nicotine solutions, used in many newer nicotine and tobacco electronic products, involves significantly more environmentally intensive manufacturing processes than products that are primarily made of plant material and plastic filters, as combustible cigarettes are."³⁵

Sustainability for whom?

These newer products are being launched with a concurrent new industry-wide greenwashing campaign, with companies arguing these new products are somehow linked to environmental sustainability. On PMI's website, the company says: "For PMI, sustainability is

an opportunity for innovation, growth, and long-term value creation, and a means to minimize the negative externalities while maximizing operational efficiency and resource allocation."³⁶ This statement is a clear example of the way that tobacco companies co-opt the language of sustainability with "growth" and "value-creation" seemingly being the primary drivers.

For example, the issue of sustainability appeared to be a key part of BAT's spring 2020 rebranding, which saw the company tagline change to "BAT: A Better Tomorrow," accompanied by a new logo and rainbow-themed website. "Sustainability" also appears as one of the five featured headers on the top menu bar. In February 2022, BAT claimed that it was "embedding ESG" in its new brands.³⁷ Meanwhile, for PMI the company argues that "sustainability is at the core of PMI's business strategy" too.³⁸

Imperial Brands says its "sustainability strategy," which "is central to the long-term success of our business and underpins our drive to create shared value for our stakeholders," is underpinned by three pillars of great significance, one of which is so-called "Next Generation Products."³⁹

For JTI, its sustainability strategy "encourages" the company "to look beyond our usual planning cycle period and think about the longevity of our business, the future of our planet, and the society we live in."⁴⁰ Once again, the longevity of the company comes first. JTI also talks about how "responsible disposal of materials, including plastics" is a key part of its core sustainability goals.

So that is the tobacco industry's new greenwashing paradox: arguing that products—that could be its most polluting in terms of energy consumption, materials and waste—are somehow integral to the industry's green, sustainable future.

The industry seems to be intent on addicting a whole new generation of people to a range of tobacco and nicotine-based unsustainable products, and not persuading consumers to kick tobacco and nicotine all together. For example, in BAT's 2021 Annual Report the company states it is on a "mission to stimulate the senses of new adult generations." BAT is aiming for 50 million consumers of its non-combustible products by 2030.⁴¹ All of these products will have an environmental impact.

Call to action and recommendations

Governments and the public around the world should be aware that greenwashing by the tobacco industry is increasing and needs to be countered.

Despite the attempts by the industry to improve its image, tobacco use remains one of the leading causes of premature death and a major cause of environmental harm. Governments that are Parties to the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) also have an obligation to exclude the industry from engagement or influence over health policy, no matter how hard the industry attempts to greenwash its image.

WHO and STOP are calling on all governments, especially ones that are Parties to the WHO FCTC, to ban the greenwashing activities of the industry, as they are a central part of the industry's so-called CSR and marketing campaigns, aimed at industry renormalization, which tends to circumvent Article 5.3. Parties are obliged to end industry CSR under the WHO FCTC, so unlike other industries, there is a mechanism in place to help governments prevent tobacco industry greenwashing.

We are also calling on environmental and sustainability accreditation organizations not to endorse industry greenwashing or provide awards to the tobacco industry. Finally, we are calling on civil society and governments to reject partnerships on environmental activities with the tobacco industry that could be used to help the industry portray itself as an environmental ally, build wider influence or circumvent Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC.

Resources:

STOP / The University of Bath:
<https://exposetobacco.org/news/greenwashing/>
<https://tobaccotactics.org/wiki/greenwashing/>

WHO:
https://www.who.int/fctc/guidelines/article_5_3.pdf
<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/70894>



About STOP (Stopping Tobacco Organizations and Products)

STOP is a global tobacco industry watchdog whose mission is to expose the tobacco industry strategies and tactics that undermine public health. STOP is funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies and comprised of a partnership among the Tobacco Control Research Group (TCRG) at the University of Bath, The Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC), the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease (The Union) and Vital Strategies. For more information, visit exposetobacco.org.

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