

Celebrity meets science: Hollywood's environmentalism and its effect

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Leonardo DiCaprio, movie star, stares out from the cover of the May 2007 issue of *Vanity Fair*. He looks both serious and sad. He's wearing a black parka and crampons, perfect for exploring the icy wilderness around him. The ice at DiCaprio's feet is melting, and nearby sits a baby polar bear, looking up at him as would an adoring fan. The polar bear also looks sad.

THE GREEN ISSUES OF VANITY FAIR

So begins the second annual "Green Issue" of *Vanity Fair*, the high-flying magazine's ambitious, in-your-face attempt to convince its readership that climate change, sustainability, and greenhouse gases are of critical and immediate concern. A quote from Theodore Roosevelt in tiny, filigreed typeface fades into the melting ice almost like an editor's afterthought: "The conservation of natural resources is the fundamental problem. Unless we solve that problem it will avail us little to solve all others."

It's clear that the magazine's marketing department (one that boasts of a total audience of 6.3 million for *Vanity Fair* and readers with an average income of \$72,303¹) believed that a photo of DiCaprio, not a quote from Roosevelt, and certainly neither photographs nor words from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, would sell magazines.

The more important marketing question should be: Can Hollywood celebrities sell to the masses the need for urgent action on the environmental problems that we face?

CELEBRITY ACTIVISTS: THE PROS

The easy, superficial answer to whether Hollywood can sell the need for urgent action would be "Yes, of course!" One can reach that conclusion simply by looking at the apparently successful advertising and marketing strategies featuring celebrities currently underway.

Toyota, for example, has credited movie stars Cameron Diaz and Tim Robbins as the perhaps unintentional leaders of the Prius movement after the two showed up at the 2003 Academy Awards in separate Prius hybrids. A Toyota communications executive told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that such a happening was "the kind of advertising that money could never buy."²

Vanity Fair, the magazine that once featured a very pregnant and nude Demi Moore on its cover, would certainly agree that celebrities have the power to influence. When the first green issue hit the newsstands in May 2006, it featured on the cover not a scientist who had done research on global warming or an unknown environmental activist but Julia Roberts, George Clooney, Al Gore, and Robert Kennedy, Jr., all wearing shades of green. Breathless environmental coverage gushed that this edition proved that environmentalism was super cool and that green was glam³. The *Toronto Sun* punned that global warming was suddenly hot⁴, and the *Denver Post* noted that the first green issue helped to signal a "tipping point" in America's grasp of global warming⁵. The movement has been labeled a "bandwagoning social change" by *New York* magazine⁶. The *Hartford Courant* opined that "[g]reen is the new black" and "[e]co is chic" and "eco consciousness has the stamp of hip," attributing the trend in part to "celebrities like Leo DeCaprio."⁷

Suddenly, and perhaps thanks in part to the linking of celebrity and cause in *Vanity Fair*, "melting ice caps" were "way hotter" than any other social movement in Tinseltown, according to *Defamer*, a celebrity-watch Web site.⁸ A *Good Morning America* report credited "a young, elite, and very sexy group" of celebrities as the power behind the new movement.⁹

¹*Vanity Fair* media kit, circulation/demographics, www.condenastmediakit.com/vf/circulation.cfm.

²Zinko, C., Take one wee car, add glitz ... zoom! 19 June 2006: *San Francisco Chronicle*, p. A1.

³Two examples: Kyles, K., Eco-Tripping: It's cool to go green. 14 August 2006: *Chicago Tribune*, p. 6; White, J., It's easier to be posh and green. 12 May 2006: *Orlando Sentinel*, p. E4.

⁴Giese, R., Time to think green. 14 April 2006: *Toronto Sun*, p. 23.

⁵Kennedy, L., Gore rides earth-alert momentum. 28 May 2006: *The Denver Post*, p. F1.

⁶Andersen, K., So we're green. Now what? 23 April 2007, *New York*, <http://nymag.com/news/imperialcity/30635/>.

⁷Morago, G., Eco chic: The marketplace has figured out there's green in being green. 22 April 2007: *Hartford Courant*, p. H1.

⁸*Defamer*, "Hollywood trendwatch: Melting ice caps way hotter than passé pandemic! 14 June 2006: Newstex Web Blogs, <http://defamer.com/hollywood/celeb-activism/hollywood-trendwatch-melting-ice-caps-way-hotter-than-passe-pandemic-180701.php>.

⁹Sawyers, D., and R. Roberts, Transcript: Brad, Cameron, Leo, Edward go green. 11 January 2007: ABC News, *Good Morning America*.

Even *Women's Wear Daily* acknowledged the celebrity push behind the green movement, writing that "green giants" like DiCaprio were using "their celebrity status to keep the environment high on everyone's agenda."¹⁰

AND CONS

But not all that's Tinsel turns to gold. Not everyone is impressed when a major Hollywood star speaks out on a social issue.

And, sure enough, the sniping about celebrities started almost immediately upon the publication of *Vanity Fair's* green issues. Some questioned the celebrities' true motivation, believing it to be publicity-driven, while others suggested that celebrities say one thing and do another. In October 2006, celebrity news Web site TMZ.com featured a story titled "Celebs who claim they're green but guzzle gas."¹¹ Julia Roberts recycles plastic bags and drinks from a reusable coffee cup? George Clooney drives an electric car? That's not enough!

A green-inspired Internet poster on the *Grist* environmental news site called this particular celebrity cause "superficial greenness."¹² A contributor to the *Washington Times* went further, suggesting that the "cute faces" of DiCaprio and the polar cub merely covered "enough journalistic toxic waste to put Love Canal to shame."¹³ The *National Review* called DiCaprio an "eco-porn centerfold," and wondered if the cover shot had "more to do with celebrity and *V.F.'s* own corporate desire for profit" than environmentalism.¹⁴

Not only are journalists skeptical, even the general public seems wary of the "fakeness factor." After all, they don't call Hollywood "Silicone Valley" (a pun on Silicon Valley) for nothing. In June 2007, the *Washington Post* asked its readers, "Do Hollywood star-activists help bring attention to global problems, or do they get in the way of those who know what they're doing?"¹⁵ While most readers were somewhat supportive and found such celebrity work mostly harmless, others responded that they viewed celebrity causes with great skepticism, writing that they rolled their eyes after hearing about celebrities' new causes. Some found them "comical" or wondered about the true motivation behind a celebrity's philanthropic work.

This brings us back to the photograph on the cover of the second *Vanity Fair* green issue, featuring Leonardo DiCaprio and the little polar bear cub. It turns out that the cover itself is not what it seems. As *Vanity Fair* editors explained in the magazine's short "On the Cover" feature (p. 18): "Knut, the cub on our cover, was born in the Berlin Zoo. We brought him together with Leonardo DiCaprio the only way we could, in a photomontage." *Vanity*

Fair then acknowledged that "there are no polar bears in Iceland" where Annie Leibovitz shot the pictures of DiCaprio on melting ice, but, it warned, in a seemingly desperate attempt to link polar bear and celebrity, that "[i]f current trends continue, there won't be any [polar bears left] in Canada either."

SCIENCE AND CELEBRITY: A HAPPY ENDING?

Not as many commentators took smirking advantage of this photomontage as one might think, and that in itself may forecast a coming change in the way some skeptics view celebrity environmentalism. Could it be that the old Hollywood adage that any publicity is good publicity also applies to problems that scientists care about?

Reverend Richard Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals is credited in the first *Vanity Fair* green issue with turning the religious right on to global warming concerns through Biblical references.¹⁶ Cizik told the *Los Angeles Times* that many celebrities are now rightly moving beyond partisan politics and are, instead, "reaching out to tell a vital story." He suggested that even skeptical conservatives will listen to those stories.¹⁷

In the end, celebrities probably won't play a particularly powerful role in Earth's future. They can only do so much, with limited scientific knowledge and typical Hollywood shooting schedules. But they may influence many others to care, and that could lead to powerful changes.

Just about the time the second *Vanity Fair* green issue hit mailboxes and newsstands, a poll taken by the *Washington Post*, *ABC News*, and Stanford University showed that one-third of Americans believe that global warming is the most important environmental problem facing the world today, more than double from the year before, and that seven people out of ten surveyed believe that the federal government should take more action to help sustain the environment.¹⁸

Whether this change in opinion is due to the diligent and careful work of scientists, to Al Gore and *An Inconvenient Truth*, or to input from Tinseltown stars remains an intriguing question. But it cannot be bad that this awareness is happening. The movement just may continue if those movie stars who support the environment can stay out of the tabloids and move their greenness into publications that reach a wider audience.

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¹⁰Groves, E., Cool to care. April 10, 2007: *Women's Wear Daily*, Supplement, p. 6.

¹¹Celebrities who claim they're green but guzzle gas. 18 October 2006: TMZ.com, www.tMZ.com/2006/10/18/celebs-who-claim-theyre-green-but-guzzle-gas.

¹²Zarconi, Green Fad, posted 12 April 2007, in response to van Schagen, S., *Vanity Fair's* green issue, part deux. 11 April 2007: *Grist*, Environmental News and Commentary: Gristmill, <http://gristmill.grist.org/story/2007/4/10/175348/588>.

¹³Gainor, D., Commentary: Green issues the place to be. 22 April 2007: *Washington Times*, p. B3.

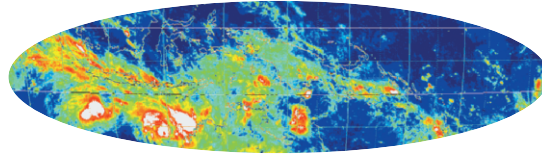
¹⁴Spencer, R., A green vanity affair. 10 April 2007: *National Review Online*, <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=YTE0MTc3ZGFkYWVhN2Q5Y2NhYzRkMDM2ZTUwYTBN2I=>.

¹⁵Igantius, D., F. Zakaria, and N. Ahn, Celebrities help or hurt global causes? posted 11 June 2007: www.washingtonpost.com, PostGlobal, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/2007/06/celebrities_help_or_hurt_global/.

¹⁶The Good Reverend. May 2006: *Vanity Fair*, p. 194.

¹⁷Goldstein, P., Believers preach gospel of green. 10 October 2006: *Los Angeles Times*, p. E1.

¹⁸Eilperin, J., and J. Cohen, Growing number of Americans see warming as leading threat. 20 April 2007: *The Washington Post*, p. A20. Poll results: www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/polls/postpoll_environment_042007.html.



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