

## Green backlash – the price of success?

Recognition and success come with a price. Not too many years ago, those of us in the business of sustainability and environmental stewardship could only dream of the day when “green” would be a universally recognized reference to something that helps preserve and protect Earth’s environment and its limited resources.

Well, dreams do come true! Today it seems that just about everyone is either “going green” or planning to do so.

Type the word “green” into your Web browser. With the exception of just a few people with the last name of Green, nearly every link that pops up has something to do with sustainability and environmental issues. My “green” search produced about 966,000,000 hits. Even Wikipedia, the Web-based encyclopedia, describes green as more than just a color: “... groups have taken on the color as a symbol of environmental protection ...”

Since its inception in 1997, the ACS Green Chemistry Institute® has been a leading advocate of the move to a more sustainable future. In the ensuing 12 years, corporations, government entities, educational institutions, special-interest groups, and millions of individuals have been jumping on the green bandwagon in ever-increasing numbers.

But, with all of this attention, we are seeing a bit of backlash. For example, look at Lake Superior State University’s 2009 “List of Words to Be Banished from the Queen’s English for Mis-use, Over-use and General Uselessness.”

This year, “green,” “going green,” “carbon footprint,” and “carbon offsetting” all made the list. In fact, green and going green received the most nominations, according to the school’s web site (<http://www.lssu.edu/banished/current.php>).

The banished words list started more than 30 years ago as a “tongue-in-cheek” publicity stunt to help draw attention to the school. It turned out to be even more successful than anyone had hoped. Newspaper editors found the annual list struck a chord with readers; enough so that every year, the list gets wide coverage by the media.

This year’s banished words list is not the only example of green backlash. Far from it. There are many reports, news articles, and even books that cite examples of growing public angst and pushback about environmental issues. Type “green backlash” in your browser and you will find page after page of links about the topic.

Another term we often hear is “green washing,” a reference to the use of misleading green marketing tactics designed to convince consumers that a company’s products have a low or negative impact on the environment, frequently despite evidence to the contrary. You’ll also get plenty of hits if you do a Web search on that phrase.

So, should we be concerned about this bit of unflattering focus? On one hand, you could say it is simply the price of success and we shouldn’t get too excited about it. On the

other hand, we would be smart to pay attention to public sentiment and look at possible ways to counter the backlash. After all, it is a credibility issue for scientists who believe green chemistry and engineering is the key to a sustainable future.

Although it doesn't appear that progress toward greater sustainability is under any great coordinated threat at the present time, we definitely need to keep the prospect of green backlash on our radar screens.

We would like to hear what you think about green backlash. How serious is the issue? Is it something that we in the sustainability world need to address? If so, what should be done?

Let us know what you think about the topic. Drop us an email at [gci@acs.org](mailto:gci@acs.org). Be sure to let us know if we can share your thoughts with other readers of our Nexus Newsletter.

Best regards,  
Dr. Robert Peoples  
Director, ACS Green Chemistry Institute®  
[r\\_peoples@gci.org](mailto:r_peoples@gci.org)

*[Here's a summary paragraph lead-in for the full story:]*

The success of worldwide sustainability initiatives has resulted in a "green backlash." How serious is this backlash? Do we need to try to counter it? GCI Director Dr. Robert Peoples invites you to let us know your thoughts on the topic of green backlash.