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Fred Pearce's Greenwash

Exposing false environmental claims



Shell's promise of a bright future turns out to be yet another false dawn

Oil company has been splashing out on ads about its shallow commitment to low-carbon technologies during Copenhagen



Fred Pearce

guardian.co.uk, Thursday 17 December 2009 07.00 GMT



Shell drip-feeds its environmental 'credentials' to the public. Photograph: James Boardman

Editors must love Shell. Almost whatever I have read about [climate change](#) and the [UN talks in Copenhagen](#) in recent weeks, it has been flanked by the familiar Shell logo somewhere in the background.

From geeky titles like [New Scientist](#) to politico mags such as [Prospect](#) and [New Statesman](#); and newspapers like the Guardian, the world's second largest corporation has been splashing out – filling screens and newsprint with adverts and underwriting special supplements. Shell also sponsored a major research project by the Economist Intelligence Unit, called [Countdown to Copenhagen](#), launched early this year at a Shell-sponsored "sustainability summit".

Nobody is suggesting that Shell is writing the copy. And surely only the most craven editor would leave out criticism of [oil](#) companies like Shell. But the unmistakable message is that Shell is going green.

retired chief executive, Jeroen van der Veer, said earlier this year of wind, solar and hydrogen power: "I don't expect them to grow much at Shell from here."

Back then I wrote that "Shell is the new Exxon". But the latest evidence suggests it is worse than that. A new study of the environmental performance of the world's top 10 oil and gas companies by the Madrid-based environmental auditing company Management & Excellence puts Shell last of all the western majors. That's behind BP, Total, Chevron and even ExxonMobil.

Shell has fallen from fourth place to seventh in the past year, and is now propping up the bottom of the table with two Chinese oil giants, Sinopec and Petrochina, and the Russian monolith Gazprom. None are known for their environmental credentials.

The audit analyses the 10 companies according to 198 different criteria. Shell gets a rating of 51%, compared with top-ranking BP's 77% and Exxon's 62%.

Shell's new chief executive Peter Voser last week made one statistical claim for his company's progress to date. Its chemical plants were, he said, 8% more energy efficient than in 2001.

Good for them. But most other companies are doing better. The M&E study found Shell next to bottom on energy savings.

Shell failed to make the grade in other areas, too. It may spend millions promoting its expertise in alternative energy technologies, but Shell came in the bottom half here, too, with only half the scores of BP, Chevron and the Brazilian oil giant, Petrobras. Once, BP and Shell were bracketed together as companies taking the lead in expanding into renewables. But the report says that among the top 10 today "only BP seems to have a real business in alternative energies".

Shell spokesman Shaun Wiggins said: "While Shell is aware of Management & Excellence, we have made a conscious choice to not participate in its rankings survey process." The company says it prefers other environmental audits.

The findings will come as no surprise to those who read Friends of the Earth's June report on Shell's Big Dirty Secret, which charged the it with being "the world's most carbon intensive oil company".

Shell claims on its websites: "We were one of the first energy companies to acknowledge the threat of climate change." The tragedy is that this is true, but that so little has come of it.

I have lost count of the number of false dawns at Shell. At the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, I reported Shell scientists promising that the company was going to plant tree across the tropics to soak up carbon dioxide. Whatever happened to that idea? Just before the Kyoto climate conference in 1997, Shell announced it was making a \$500m investment in solar power. By the World Summit in Johannesburg in 2002 it claimed to be installing solar panels across the developing world. Today it is absent from that business too.

Wiggins said Shell has spent \$1.7bn on renewable in the past five years, but now concentrates on biofuels because they are "closest to our core business". But he agreed

that oil and gas still make up 95% of its business, and the truth is that the company has flattered to deceive for almost two decades now.

Readers of its current adverts are directed towards a [zappy and visionary website](#) devoted entirely to what might happen in the future. But the future has been a long time coming for Shell. And it seems ever further away.

Ads by Google

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Cut Your Carbon Emissions

Our green energy plan helps you cut your energy use. Then rewards you!

www.southern-electric.co.uk

BP Carbon Calculator


Find Out How To Be Energy Efficient With The BP Carbon Calculator

BP.Com

Comments in chronological order (Total 17 comments)

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 Staff

 Contributor



yayforsunshine

17 Dec 2009, 9:29AM

Wow, a Guardian environment article without a Shell advert banner on the page.

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clareface

17 Dec 2009, 10:36AM

Well done Fred Pierce. Shell are a dreadful company on so many levels. The company's commitment to oil extraction in the Tar Sands in Alberta, Canada (the dirtiest oil there is in the world, as of yet anyway) as well as its 40 year continual investment in the Niger Delta, despite all the violence, corruption, underdevelopment and local environmental devastation that has taken place (and Shell has been at the centre of all of it) shows that we must see through their greenwash, The Guardian included. Isn't it time you stopped their advertising on the website?(Even if you do have a duty to "impartiality" or some similar excuse)

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17 Dec 2009, 11:14AM

Shell's core business is oil and gas. What we get fed is PR fluff claiming Shell is a 'green oil company' working to solve the worlds energy crisis, when 95% of its business is in digging fossil fuels out the ground for burning.

But is it realistic to demand that the corporate money machines like Shell operate by some moral code where they would invest in solar and wind over oil and gas which makes more profit? In effect a request to be less competetive, outside their core competencies, and make lower returns for their investors. I dont think so, it has to be a level playing field for all which is why the legislation is needed.

But if politicians fail to agree worthwhile legislation then we get no where. If vested interests control the politicians it never had a chance.

Even without any worthwhile legislation things will look very different in a few years time in the dawn of the new energy age, when humanity wakes up to declining oil reserves. It will likely be a rude shock for everyone.

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17 Dec 2009, 11:43AM

Nice article and it is all well and true. However, at the end of the day ALL of the oil companies mentioned above (plus many more) don't give a monkey's about the environment; it's all about profit.

The real problem is that these companies have now become so big that no government can control them. Maybe it's time for another breakup of Standard Oil, but I can't see it happening. Big business rules and there's nothing bigger than the oil companies.

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17 Dec 2009, 11:44AM

So whats the point here?

Shell are a dirty company? Yes well thanks for pointing out the obvious. They are an oil and gas company and I expect them to get it out of the ground for us to burn.

No amount of auditing, PR, etc... is going to turn that in to a Green industry and I seriously suspect you would have some kind of mental failing if you believed it has or will become suddenly a more green thing.

The real problem is not with Shell, but with everyone else. They exist because we need

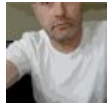
and want what they have in ever increasing quantities.

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[RubberBaron](#)

17 Dec 2009, 12:26PM

@climberdave

So whats the point here? Shell are a dirty company? Yes well thanks for pointing out the obvious.

The point is that Shell, via their flashy advertising, are trying to convince everybody of the opposite.

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[tom1](#)

17 Dec 2009, 12:29PM

Wow, a Guardian environment article without a Shell advert banner on the page.

Yes, but there's a nice illustration of their logo provided as a visual stimulus above the story. Just in case you forgot what their emblem looks like.

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[sabelmouse](#)

17 Dec 2009, 12:33PM

yatforsunshine

but instead a nice shellpic in the article

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[brookerfan](#)

17 Dec 2009, 12:51PM

Must have taken ages to write this article. Cant imagine all the research needed to do it.

Thank the lord you did Fred -otherwise i might not understand Shell and their eeeevil ways. #

I might think they are a charity helping old ladies cross the road.

@RubberBarron

The point is that Shell, via their flashy advertising, are trying to convince everybody of the opposite.

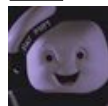
This is news ????????????????

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MMeister

17 Dec 2009, 1:00PM

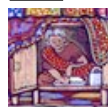
Bravo to the Guardian editors for posting this. How many newspapers would publish articles that make their sponsors out to be chumps? This kind of integrity is why I visit this site.

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OrnamentalHermit

17 Dec 2009, 2:30PM

Companies like Shell justify all they do as part of their primary commitment - to make profits for their shareholders. But Shareholders aren't some separate species, magically protected from the environmental devastation to come. However wealthy, it won't be nice for anyone to have to live in a world at war over basic resources, clean air, water and "lebensraum" , once the flooded-out populations really start migrating. Privileged enclaves and gated communities are not such desirable dwelling-places when it's no longer safe to step outside them.

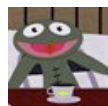
No doubt things will have to get a lot visibly worse before these companies and shareholders acknowledge that, nowadays, less profit equals better quality of life for all, themselves included. None so blind as those who prefer not to look.

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climberdave

17 Dec 2009, 2:42PM

This is news ????????????????

And that was my point.

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**robertg22**

17 Dec 2009, 3:48PM

Smart companies won't waste a penny on climate change stuff because man isn't affecting the climate. The only thing man made about climate change is the computer programs that fudge the numbers to make it look like man is affecting the climate. If you turn off the computers man made climate change will be ended.

It's time the whole climate change scam brought to an end and the people behind the scam, jailed.

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17 Dec 2009, 5:51PM

There's lies, damned lies and oil company press releases.

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17 Dec 2009, 7:01PM

Natural gas exists in enough quantities (more than oil and coal put together) to provide a bridge fuel to a renewable future immediately.

How come the UK press didn't report on this presentation from Copenhagen:

<http://www.cleanskies.org/whatsnew.html#event>

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17 Dec 2009, 11:47PM

Smart companies won't waste a penny on climate change stuff because man isn't affecting the climate. The only thing man made about climate change is the computer programs that fudge the numbers to make it look like man is affecting the climate. If you turn off the computers man made climate change will be ended.

Wrong.

The information comes from 150 years of detail weather observations and hundreds of thousands of years of ice-cores, sediment cores, coral cores cave data and whole lot of other stuff.

The computer models, although very accurate these days, are unnecessary.
You might want to conclude this display of swinish ignorance by declaring that you don't believe in all that godless commie Theory of Gravity stuff before throwing yourself out of a 4th storey window.

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[Redbindipperz](#)

18 Dec 2009, 7:42AM

@macsporan

and hundreds of thousands of years of ice-cores, sediment cores, coral cores cave data and whole lot of other stuff.

As the earth is only 10,000 years old (maximum) how is this possible?

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