



Mr. Green Jeans...

Had the Right Idea

By Doug Fredericksen

It starts with a crack that echoes through your spine. As the volume increases to an ethereal roar, you begin to see it: an avalanche of ice and rock calves away in slow motion from the massive glacial mountain and plunges into the sea.

You are the only one that will ever see this phenomenon. The glacier is thousands of years old and it has stood as a silent sentinel throughout man's brief journey on this sphere. Now, it is disappearing, falling into the ocean and melting into the rising tides of a warming planet.

In our short lifetimes, many of the glaciers that have existed on this planet for thousands of years have met their fate in this fashion. There were 150 glaciers in Glacier National Park in 1850. Today, there are 26. Scientists predict that at the current rate, Glacier National Park will be glacier free in 20 years. All the ice must go somewhere, so the mean sea level has begun to rise. It has risen between four and eight inches in the last 100 years. Most experts agree that it will rise at least two feet by the turn of this century.

The average human is a little more than five feet tall, so this doesn't seem like a very dramatic change. Unfortunately, man has clustered development around the seashore to such an extent that the homes of hundreds of millions of people will disappear beneath the waves when this process reaches its critical mass. We had an unfortunate taste of this predicament during the recent cyclones that ravaged the coastlines of Myanmar.

Lately, perhaps too late, man has begun to realize that the effect we have on our environment might be catastrophic. But we are a resilient race and man is not ready to be shuffled off onto high desert plains, or be forced to live an austere life with the carbon footprint of our Neanderthal ancestors. We're more than comfortable with our plasma screens, cell phones, cars and computers. We've reached the pinnacle of our technological existence and are not ready to surrender the gains we've made. We will not go quietly into that good night.

A movement has begun, however—a green movement that will sweep toxic substances from the land, sea and air, restore the forests and streams and halt the climate change that is killing our planet. Unfortunately, the goals and methods of the green movement are as cloudy as the stultifying air that surrounds Los Angeles. We have lots of money. Isn't there a way we can buy our way out of catastrophic climate change?

When I was young, I watched "The Captain Kangaroo Show" nearly every day. It was a low-tech program, originally in black and white, where the Captain, a rotund grandfatherly figure, would come out and introduce a variety of puppets, guest entertainers, cartoons and his regular sidekick, Mr. Green Jeans. Actor Hugh Brannum also occasionally appeared as other characters like Greeno the Clown, but his permanent gig was as the quiet and friendly farmer in his signature green overalls.



Mr. Green Jeans (Hugh Brannum) and Captain Kangaroo (Bob Keeshan) meet some rabbits. Brannum's country farmer character espoused the virtues of nature for decades on the popular children's program.

Mr. Green Jeans would bring out a baby animal, or a clever pet, and spend his time fawning over the creature as a miracle of God's creation. He would bring out a basket of fruit or vegetables and talk about the beauty of eating your own harvest. It gave you the

feeling that everything would be alright as long as there were animals to pet and crops to raise. Mr. Green Jeans' simple platitudes on the environment were a far cry from the eco-intensive activism we see today, yet his heart was in the right place, and sometimes it's better to lead from the heart.

Meanwhile, we still appear more inclined to lead with our wallets.

Today, the axiom of the environmental movement is to "Think globally, but act locally." While every man, woman and child on this island earth can help turn the tide by doing the small things, like planting a tree or driving less, much of the heavy lifting needs to be done by governments and corporations. While many cynics believe that corporate entities only care for the almighty dollar, facts might belie such assumptions.

With the glaring exception of our rejection of the Kyoto Protocol, our government has brought forward many environmentally sound regulations that will help stave off further destruction of the environment. Private corporations have fallen all over themselves to get on the bandwagon with green practices and direct assistance to various environmental causes. But as with any enterprise that affects billions of people and costs trillions of dollars, mistakes will be made.

One of the programs touted by the federal government is the "Healthy Forests Initiative." With this program, the government has enlisted private contractors to build roads into National Forests so that they can identify and harvest sick, dying trees that might contribute to a cataclysmic forest fire. But then they also mark and harvest those trees that might "pose a risk" to the surrounding wildlife and those trees that might block a road into the forest that might be needed to harvest more trees to protect the environment.

Another recently enacted federal program is the "Clear Skies Initiative." With this program, the federal government has managed to regulate toxic emissions by selling pollution "credits" to manufacturers. The "credits" work a little bit like the indulgences of Martin Luther's time, whereas a corporation can commit a variety of environmental "sins" as long as they pay for them with the ubiquitous "credits." Of course, there are many manufacturers that produce no pollution whatsoever, so

they are entitled to a certain amount of credits that they can then sell to the highest bidder so that the buyer can continue with their current level of emissions. In this manner, pollution itself has been turned into a commodity.

Not to be outdone by government interests, corporate entities have similarly stepped into the green movement in a big way. Ad space has been purchased in the choicest media outlets to tout companies' commitment to the environment. Employees have been encouraged to carpool and bike to work, thus eliminating the need for additional parking at the often-overcrowded parking facility that serves the business establishment. Recycling bins have been placed near the water cooler in the office. Recycling bins!

Corporate responsibility and proactive policies are essential in the preservation of our environment. When advances are made that help to preserve the planet, many will have to come from big business. The door is wide open for a variety of contributions from these interests.

Big oil was one of the first to tell us how they've stepped up to the plate and, to hear them tell it, done so with a vengeance. While nobody from the oil industry will deny that their products have contributed to high pollution levels, the oil companies have made the case that not only is the environmental damage sustained through fossil fuel minimal, it has been offset by the responsible practices and community spirit of the oil industry.

British Petroleum has been airing commercials that espouse the healthy benefits of BP's stewardship of the fossil fuels they market. BP has adopted the slogan "Beyond Petroleum" to help claim they are investing heavily in industries that will wean our society from oil usage. The company's commercials intone the public responsibility of the corporation, with pictures of windmills and solar panels drifting across the screen. Unfortunately, BP has invested more money in their commercials than in alternative energy. In fact, the "alternative" industries in which BP does invest include ethanol and natural gas, fuel sources with their own well established sets of environmental problems. While the commercials invariably end with a young child holding a daisy, little BP does will contribute to a positive environment where healthy children can walk fearlessly through fields of greenery.

ExxonMobil is another oil giant that has begun to espouse its environmental street cred. While oil extraction has ruined pristine wilderness areas and contributed to the degradation of the environment, ExxonMobil makes the case that its stewardship of the land, sea and air has improved the future for our children; Valdez be damned.

In a 2007 report by the Union of Concerned Scientists, ExxonMobil is listed as having given 16 million dollars between 1998 and 2005 to organizations whose main focus is debunking global warming. Alden Meyer, the Director of Strategy and Policy for the UCS said, "ExxonMobil has manufactured uncertainty about the human causes of global warming just as tobacco companies denied their product caused lung cancer."

It seems every supermarket, department store and mom and pop grocery now encourages the reuse of shopping bags, recycling of plastic bags and purchase of sturdy canvas shopping bags bearing the imprint of the retailer. Of course many people will feel guilty taking their "permanent" shopping bag to the store of a different retailer, while the retailers are hoping that the bag itself will engender a certain brand affinity that will keep the consumer coming back to the environmentally sensitive firm that has their name and logo printed on the outside of the "permanent" shopping bags.

Recently I purchased a can of Campbell's chicken noodle soup. This product is the ultimate comfort food, good for colds, flu, depression and pop art by the likes of Andy Warhol. It was with some surprise I noticed that the can I purchased looked like something from a St. Patrick's Day drinking binge. The ubiquitous red and white art on the can that had once been such an iconic symbol had been replaced with a gaudy green label that touted the product's environmental benefits. Campbell's hadn't done anything different with the soup, just made a new label to let consumers know they had a "green" product on their hands.

The construction industry has made its collective voice heard on this subject, as well. You can't visit a supply house without running into a bevy of products that will make your construction project "greener," more environmentally sensitive and carbon neutral. Customers demand that their buildings be built with sustainable wood. Employees want offices that don't leach toxic gases from glues and plastics. Developers want their projects to conform to LEED standards so

that they can feel good about their business and advertise their commitment to the environment.

Recently an ad from the 2008 National Association of Home Builders Show in Florida caught my eye. Green was the theme of the show. One of the highpoints of the show was a 6,725 square foot, two-story plantation-style mansion that was constructed for the show. It was built to showcase the elements of green construction. There were some nice touches on the home, such as solar hot water panels and tankless water heaters, but there was also so much more. There were nine-foot ceilings, his and hers toilets in the master bedroom, and both an indoor and outdoor state of the art kitchen, each with their own refrigerator. But above all, there was 6,725 feet of indoor space.

While I won't begrudge the contractors building whatever the public asks for, perhaps the problem lies with the public itself. Any person who demands a house like the one shown at the Florida show probably drives to the event in a Hummer and leaves lights on in every room. If a person really wants a green house, they shouldn't build a mansion.

Ultimately, the environmental movement rests on the tired old mantra, "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle." While technology can do wonders to help preserve the environment, it can also wreak havoc on our fragile planet. There is a lot of money to be made in the construction industry with good, responsible technology such as solar panels, recycled water, windmills and energy efficiency. Yet in the end, there is no way consumers can buy their way out of global warming.

If the world is to be saved, it must be saved with a simpler strategy. The sun, wind, water and fire have been used since this planet began. We need to step back from the brink of the technological abyss and practice a different lifestyle, a lifestyle that uses the planet and its elements in harmony.

We don't need to dress in skins and live in a cave to practice a carbon neutral lifestyle, but a little humility wouldn't hurt. We need to see the world in a grain of sand, the miracle of this planet that sustains us. Our planet is a complex web of symbiotic relationships and if we don't learn to preserve these relationships, we will all perish. We need to think globally and act locally. Mr. Green Jeans had the right idea. 🌿

