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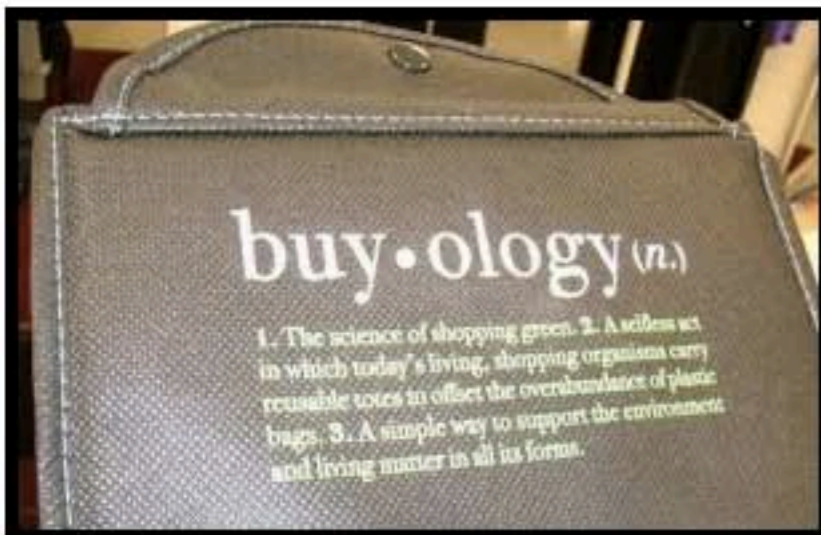
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→ Culture, Environment

Is Buying Green a Moral Offset?

— By **Stephanie Volkoff Green** | Fri September 18, 2009 2:54 PM PST

—Photo via Flickr user eric731.

While consumers can restore their eco-ego through carbon offset programs after buying an SUV or plane ticket, new research suggests that buying green products functions as a type of "moral offset."

Researchers at the University of Toronto questioned the assumption that the "green consumer" is also socially responsible and a humanitarian. The study found that making

environmentally responsible consumer choices leads people to make unethical decisions (or at least not as nice ones) later on:

"the halo associated with green consumerism has to be taken with reservations. While mere exposure to green products can have a positive societal effect by inducing pro-social and ethical acts, purchasing green products may license indulgence in self-interested and unethical behaviors."

The researchers conducted three experiments in which students were asked to purchase or evaluate green products, or buy conventional ones, and then participate in an "unrelated" task. In each experiment, students who didn't buy green products acted more altruistically and honestly in the second task than those who did. In the words of the researchers, "people act less altruistically and are more likely to cheat and steal after purchasing green products as opposed to conventional products." However, if you consider that 98 percent of so-called "green products" are based on misleading claims, then that moral high ground is even shakier.

So are Prius drivers and folks who drink organic, fairly traded coffee not as nice as those driving a conventional sedan and drinking Starbucks? Seems like a question to ask the Girl Scouts and Salvation Army: Are people more generous in front of Safeway or Whole Foods?

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