Walmart's Greenwash

How the company's much-publicized sustainability campaign falls short, while its relentless growth devastates the environment.

Stacy Mitchell
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INSTITUTE FOR Local Self-Reliance

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Walmart's sustainability campaign has helped improve its public image, enabling the company to grow bigger and faster. That growth, ironically, has dramatically increased the retailer's environmental footprint, and hurt local economies and the U.S. job market along the way.

2005 – year Walmart launched its sustainability campaign

38 – percentage of Americans who had an unfavorable view of Walmart in 2005 [83]

20 – percentage of Americans who had an unfavorable view of Walmart in 2010 [84]

530 million – total square footage of Walmart's U.S. stores in 2005 [85]

698 million – total square footage of Walmart's U.S. stores in 2011 [86]

641 million – approximate area of the island of Manhattan in square feet [87]

1,587 – number of Walmart stores outside of the U.S. in 2005

4,557 – number of Walmart stores outside of the U.S. in 2011 [88]

60,000 – approximate number of acres covered by Walmart's U.S. stores and parking lots [89]

0 – number of times since 2007 that Walmart's annual sustainability reports have referenced the company's impact on land-use patterns and household driving

152 – number of abandoned Walmart stores in the U.S. listed as available for lease or sale on the company's realty website [90]

210 – minimum number of new stores Walmart plans to open in the U.S. in 2012 [91]

1.5 million – approximate metric tons of CO_2 saved each year by energy-efficiency improvements Walmart has made to U.S. stores built before 2006 [92]

3.5-3.9 million – approximate metric tons of CO_2 emitted each year by Walmart stores built in the U.S. since 2006 [93]

<2 – percentage of Walmart's U.S. electricity consumption that currently comes from its solar projects and specially purchased wind energy [94]

300 – approximate number of years it would take for Walmart to reach 100 percent renewable energy at its current pace

1988 – year Walmart opened its first supercenter selling a full line of groceries

25 – percentage of U.S. grocery sales now captured by Walmart [95]

29 – number of U.S. metro areas where Walmart captures more than half of all grocery spending [96]

196,000 – number of U.S. jobs lost from 2001 to 2006 as a result of Walmart's imports from China [97]

1,940 – number of small retail firms (fewer than 20 employees) per 1 million population in the U.S. in 1992 [98]

1,455 – number of small retail firms per 1 million population in the U.S. in 2007 [99]

$312 billion – Walmart's revenue in 2005 [100]

$419 billion – Walmart's revenue in 2010 [101]

$8.81 – average hourly wage at Walmart's U.S. stores [102]

$943 – average annual cost to taxpayers of providing Medicaid, food stamps, and cash assistance for each Walmart employee, based on data from Ohio [103]

Introduction: Sustainability as a Growth Strategy

Walmart adopted sustainability as a corporate strategy in 2005. It was struggling mightily at the time. Bad headlines stalked the chain, as its history of mistreating workers and suppliers finally caught up with it. One analysis found that as many as 8 percent of Walmart's customers had stopped shopping at its stores.[1] Grassroots groups were blocking or delaying one-third of its development projects.[2] Stockholders were growing nervous. Between 2000 and 2005, Walmart's share price fell 20 percent.

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http://grist.org/series/2011-11-07-walmart-greenwash-retail-giant-still-unsustainable/

As then-CEO Lee Scott told *The New York Times*, improving labor conditions would cost too much.[3] It would also mean ceding some control to employees and perhaps even a union. Going green was a better option for repairing the company's image. It offered ways to cut costs and, rather than undermining Walmart's control, sustainability could actually augment its power over suppliers. Environmentalism also had strong appeal among urban liberals in the Northeast and West Coast — the very markets Walmart needed to penetrate in order to keep its U.S. growth going.

Since Scott first unveiled Walmart's sustainability program, the company's head office in Bentonville, Ark., has issued a steady stream of announcements about cutting energy use, reducing waste, and, more recently, selling healthier food. Most of these announcements declare goals, not achievements. But the goals sound audacious enough to reliably produce sweeping headlines and breathless accounts of how Walmart could remake the world by bending industrial production to its will.

By 2010, the number of Americans reporting an unfavorable view of Walmart had fallen by nearly half, from a peak of 38 percent in 2005, to 20 percent.[4]

What the news media haven't reported

Looking back at the coverage of Walmart's sustainability campaign over the last seven years, it is shocking just how much of a public relations boost the media have given the company and how little public accountability they have demanded in return.

Some of the most serious environmental consequences of Walmart's business model simply aren't on the table. Walmart doesn't talk about them and, despite expending a lot of ink and airtime on the company's green activities, the news media don't either. Indeed, journalists rarely stray beyond the parameters of what Walmart has put in front of them.

More surprising is the absence of basic information essential to evaluating what Walmart is actually accomplishing. Take, for example, the share of Walmart's electricity that comes from renewable sources. There have been thousands of news stories and blog posts on the company's renewable energy activities since 2005, so one would think this number would be reported often. In fact, it does not appear to have been published anywhere. (According to our analysis, as of 2011, less than 2 percent of the company's electric power in the U.S. was coming from its wind and solar projects.)

Or take the case of the Sustainability Index, Walmart's much-publicized effort to put a green rating on every product it sells. Two years after the media fanfare surrounding the announcement, no journalist seems to have investigated what progress, if any, Walmart has actually made.

This report aims to fill in some of these gaps and, hopefully, inspire other writers and journalists to take a closer look at what Walmart is and isn't doing.

By 2010, the number of Americans reporting an unfavorable view of Walmart had fallen by nearly half, from 38 percent in 2005, to 20 percent. Today Walmart sells 35 percent more stuff in the U.S. than it did when it launched its sustainability campaign in 2005, and its international store count has almost tripled, from about 1,600 to 4,600 stores.

What environmentalists haven't paid attention to

"Walmart is here to stay" — that's the refrain one often hears from the many environmental organizations and green-business advocates who have applauded the company's sustainability efforts. The world's largest retailer isn't going away, the thinking goes, so anything it does to reduce its footprint is a good thing.

But Walmart circa 2005 is, in fact, long gone. Today's Walmart is much, much bigger. It sells 35 percent more stuff in the U.S., and its international store count has almost tripled, from about 1,600 to 4,600 stores.[5]

For Walmart, sustainability is a growth strategy — and a highly effective (and darkly ironic) one at that. Seven years ago, Walmart was facing widespread opposition, including legislation that would have required better labor practices and limited the company's growth. Thanks at least in part to its sustainability campaign, and the warm reception from many environmentalists, those roadblocks have eroded and Walmart's expansion is once again rolling at full speed.

As it grows, Walmart pushes out existing enterprises and local economic systems and replaces them with its own, often far more polluting, global supply chain and sprawling stores. If any single fact could sum up what's at stake, it would be that Walmart now controls one-quarter of our country's grocery sales and aims to capture half — a prospect with disastrous implications for the environment, social justice, and local economies.

So far, though, most mainstream environmental organizations have focused on the small bits of good that Walmart could do — reduce PVC in packaging, for example — while ignoring the much larger consequences of its ever-expanding business model.

This report, we hope, will help initiate a more comprehensive and critical response to Walmart's sustainability initiatives.

Shoddier Products: How Walmart Accelerates the Flow of Goods from Factory to Landfill

One way to begin an investigation of Walmart's environmental impact is to look at how Levi's jeans have changed over the last 25 years. Compared to what's sold today, Levi's from the 1980s were made of sturdier denim, more substantial seams, and bigger rivets. Back then, Levi's jeans were produced in the U.S. and they cost more (after accounting for inflation) than today's Levis, which are manufactured abroad. Much the same has happened across the apparel industry: clothing has become cheaper and shoddier overall. While there are several factors driving this transformation, one of the most significant is Walmart and the way it's reshaping manufacturing around the world.

Since 1994, the consumer price of apparel, in real terms, has fallen by 39 percent. "It is now possible to buy clothing, long a high-priced and valuable commodity, by the pound, for prices comparable to cheap agricultural products," notes Juliet Schor.[6] Cheapness — and the decline in durability that has accompanied it – has triggered an astonishing increase in the amount of clothing we buy. In the mid-1990s, the average American bought 28 items of clothing a year. Today, we buy 59 items.[7] We also throw away an average of 83 pounds of textiles per person, mostly discarded apparel, each year. That's four times as much as we did in 1980, according to an EPA analysis of municipal waste streams.[8]

Most consumer products have followed a similar trajectory over the last two decades. Walmart has done more than any other company to drive these changes, though other retailers have since followed its model. Where once we measured value when we shopped, Walmart trained us to see only price. Its hard bargaining pushed manufacturers offshore and drove them, year after year, to cut more corners and make shoddier products. As union-wage production jobs and family-owned businesses fell by the wayside, many Americans could no longer afford anything but Walmart's cheap offerings.

Today Walmart says it wants to reduce the amount of pollution involved in making some of the stuff it sells. That seems like a good thing – except that everything else Walmart does is designed to undermine the durability of consumer goods, accelerate the flow of products from factory to landfill, and get us to buy more stuff. Even if Walmart does succeed in reducing the resources used to make a T-shirt or a television set, those gains will be more than outstripped by growth in the number of T-shirts and TVs we're consuming.

The six-dollar toaster

On a recent visit to Walmart store No. 2659, just outside of Portland, Maine, it was hard to find evidence of a shift to more sustainable products, beyond displays of compact fluorescent light bulbs and reusable shopping bags. There were no Seventh Generation cleaning supplies or organic cotton clothes, for example.

The store was, however, selling a Rival-brand toaster for $6.24[9] — a price that renders its longevity virtually irrelevant. If it breaks, just buy another.

Prices on general household goods have fallen by about one-third since the mid-1990s. Given how awash in stuff we were in those boom years, it's shocking just how much more we buy now. Since 1995, the number of toasters and other small electro-thermal appliances sold in the U.S. each year increased from 188 million to 279 million. The average household now buys a new TV every 2.5 years, up from every 3.4 years in the early 1990s. We buy more than 2 billion bath towels a year, up from 1.4 billion in 1994.[10] And on and on.

While there are certainly factors beyond Walmart that have contributed to this ever-expanding avalanche of consumption, the company has been a major driver of the trend. Its growth and profitability rest on fueling an ever-faster churn of products, from factory to shelf to house to landfill.

In a paper that came out in 2010, three business professors illustrate how inducing manufacturers to cut product quality enhances Walmart's competitive position. "Because lower quality products are usually cheaper to produce, it is often argued that discount retailers induce lower quality in order to drive down prices. Our model suggests, however, that the competitive and bargaining position effects provide incentives to induce lower quality regardless of changes in production costs," the authors write.[11]

In other words, getting manufacturers to make shoddier products doesn't just mean that Walmart can offer super-cheap wares; it also helps Walmart marginalize its competitors and gain more dominance over its suppliers. By using its market power to drive down the quality of manufacturing, Walmart gains an advantage over department stores and independent retailers because quality (and the knowledgeable service that typically goes with it) is no longer an important factor in a consumer's choice about where to shop. If you are going to end up with a crappy to mediocre blender anyway, then why bother spending more or availing yourself of the advice and service of a specialty retailer? Reducing the overall quality of products thus destroys a key competitive advantage of Walmart's smaller rivals.

Even when a manufacturer responds to Walmart's cost-cutting pressure by producing a separate, cheaper line to sell only in big-box stores — as many name-brand companies now do — the brand's reputation for quality can suffer, making it hard for specialty retailers to persuade customers that the higher-quality, longer-lasting versions they offer are worth more.

As local stores and other competing retailers are weakened, manufacturers become more dependent on Walmart. Many major consumer products companies now rely on Walmart for one-quarter or more of their business. According to the study, this gives the chain greater bargaining power over its suppliers, who have fewer options for bringing their wares to market and thus little leverage to resist the retailer's demands.

Walmart is also a master at getting shoppers to buy more than they came for. It employs all of the techniques that have been shown to spur "unplanned buying," according to a recent study in the *Journal of Marketing*.[12] The study found that large stores that promote the concept of one-stop shopping and can only be reached by car generate the most impulse buys. Marketing messages that evoke abstract shopping goals are also highly effective at inducing people to put more stuff in their carts. The authors cite Walmart's "Save Money, Live Better" slogan as a leading example.

According to the study, the least amount of unplanned buying occurs when a shopping trip involves multiple stores, each with a specific product focus, and the customer arrives on foot or by mass transit – in other words, when you shop at small neighborhood and downtown retailers.

A low-tar cigarette

Walmart has a powerful incentive to increase the scale of consumption. Sustainability will never be more than a modest sideshow to this larger endeavor. Nowhere in Walmart's pronouncements about greening its supply chain does the company mention the durability of products or the pace at which households burn through the stuff its stores sell.

As consumers, we're hardly innocent in all of this, of course. With prices falling below the real human and environmental costs of production, we have been happy to upgrade to a bigger TV or buy four T-shirts when one would suffice. But imagining that Walmart might be part of the cure is like putting tobacco companies in charge of ending smoking. Walmart's sustainability plan is the low-tar cigarette of the environmental movement: it admits there's a problem, but offers a kind of pseudo solution that's really aimed at keeping us all puffing.

As Walmart takes over an ever-larger share of the global economy, companies that favor a more durable and sustainable model of production are squeezed to the margins. The business press is replete with tales of storied U.S. brands, like Levi's, which held out against Walmart for years before finally giving in, moving overseas, and figuring out how to make a $10 pair of jeans. Some still resist. Stihl, for example, the world's leading maker of chain saws, has been vocal about retaining the quality of its products by not selling to the big boxes. But if Walmart and those that follow its model continue to grow, there may soon come a day when no producer can escape its dictates.

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Walmart's Minimal Progress on Renewable Energy

Context is critical to understanding Walmart's sustainability initiatives and their impact on the retailer's overall environmental footprint. But context has been sorely absent in the news media's coverage of Walmart's green efforts. Even within the environmental community, conversations about Walmart tend to miss the big picture.

Walmart's renewable-energy activities provide a perfect example. Seven years ago, the company announced that it was setting a goal of being "supplied by 100 percent renewable energy." Succinct, powerfully stated goals are a signature of Walmart's sustainability campaign — in part, it seems, because journalists often repeat these goals verbatim, so they function like stealth marketing slogans that infiltrate media coverage. Walmart's renewable-energy goal has been especially effective on this front, appearing in thousands of newspaper articles and countless blog posts. Many of these stories use the goal as a jumping-off point to highlight the retailer's renewable-energy projects, which include putting solar panels on 130 stores in California and buying 180 million kilowatt-hours of wind power in Texas annually.[13] These stories create the overall impression that Walmart is making great progress on renewable energy.

But what if, rather than repeating Walmart's stated goal of 100 percent renewable power, these news stories had instead reported that the company currently derives less than 2 percent of its electricity from its solar projects and wind-power purchases? That's not a figure Walmart has published, and journalists have done little to bring it to light. At its current pace of converting to renewables, it would take Walmart about 300 years to get to 100 percent clean power. Some of its competitors are already there. Kohl's and Whole Foods (both of which, it should be noted, have their own problems when it comes to the gap between their environmental PR and reality) have fully converted to renewable power, as have many independent retailers.

What's holding Walmart up? It doesn't want to spend the money. "Because wind and solar power generally cost more than electricity from coal, nuclear or natural gas in most places, Walmart can't or won't buy clean energy on a scale that matters," sustainable-business reporter Marc Gunther recently wrote.[14] Walmart, which reported operating profits of $25.5 billion last year, said as much in its latest sustainability report: "it has sometimes been difficult to find and develop low-carbon technologies that meet our ROI [return-on-investment] requirements."[15]

This a very different picture from the one the media have presented so far, which has portrayed Walmart as taking a leadership role on renewable power.

Another step back adds even more context: While the company has been talking big about renewable energy, its greenhouse gas emissions have been rising steadily. Between 2005 and 2009, Walmart's reported emissions in the U.S. grew by roughly 7 percent. In Asia, they doubled. The company says its operations produced 21 million metric tons of greenhouse gases in 2009, and it expects 13 million metric tons of cumulative growth in emissions by 2015.[16]

Neither Walmart's renewable-energy projects nor its efficiency efforts are operating at a scale even remotely in league with the company's size and growth trajectory. In the U.S., Walmart's energy-efficiency steps have reduced energy use in stores built before 2006 by 10 percent, on average, saving about 1.5 million metric tons of CO2 annually. But new stores built in the U.S. since 2006 have added at least 3.5 million metric tons to Walmart's yearly CO2 output.[17]

The big payback

Commentators often note that cutting use of fuel and electricity saves Walmart money. But this is small change compared to the real payoff: a greener image and an enormous amount of positive publicity. This PR boost has enabled Walmart to accelerate the pace of its expansion. Seven years ago, even the retailer's own customers were starting to avoid its stores, while its development plans in cities like New York and Washington faced an impenetrable wall of opposition. Today, public opinion has shifted. Walmart's store proposals, especially in the environmentally conscious Northeast and West Coast, are moving forward with less friction than before.

With fewer obstacles in its way, Walmart is anticipating big growth over the next couple of years. In the fiscal year that will end on Jan. 31, 2012, Walmart expects to have added between 36 and 39 million square feet of store space worldwide, and over the next year, between 45 and 49 million more – altogether, the equivalent of up to 470 average-sized supercenters. It also expects, next year, to grow sales by 5 to 7 percent, or $21 to $29 billion.[18]

The company's growth and sales goals always have specific time frames attached, of course, while its renewable-energy goal remains as undefined as ever. So as Walmart expands, thanks in part to goodwill generated by its green campaign, its environmental footprint will keep expanding right along with it.

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What Happened to Walmart's Promised Green Product Rankings?

In 2009, Walmart created a stir when it announced that it would develop a Sustainability Index to assess the environmental impacts of every item on its shelves and provide an easy rating system to help shoppers make greener choices. CEO Mike Duke described the index as "a simple tool that informs consumers about the sustainability of products" and helps them "consume in a more sustainable way."[19] This, in turn, would induce Walmart's 100,000 suppliers to shrink their footprints.

The company set a five-year timetable. Many commentators gushed. *The New York Times* found the news so momentous that it dedicated an editorial to it, noting, "Given Wal-Mart's huge purchasing power, if it is done right it could promote both much-needed transparency and more environmentally sensitive practices."[20]

More than two years on, this ambitious project doesn't have much to show for itself. A consumer label "is really far off and maybe not a reality," according to Elizabeth Sturcken, a managing director at Environmental Defense Fund, which has partnered with Walmart on its sustainability initiatives. "This information is really complex. Getting it reduced into a simple label for consumers is very challenging."[21]

Still, Sturcken thinks the project could produce valuable information for Walmart and manufacturers, and drive product improvements behind the scenes. "I think getting it into a system that product buyers and suppliers could use is much more attainable," she said.

But even that seems to be proving elusive. To do the necessary product analysis, Walmart founded the Sustainability Consortium, a university-hosted group. It has since attracted 75 corporate members, including Monsanto and McDonald's, each of which must contribute at least $100,000 to the effort. To run the consortium, Walmart chose two academic institutions with which it has close ties: the Applied Sustainability Center, which is part of the

University of Arkansas' Sam M. Walton College of Business and was established in 2007 with a grant from the Walmart Foundation, and Arizona State University's Global Institute of Sustainability, whose board of directors is co-chaired by Rob Walton, son of Walmart founder Sam Walton and chair of Walmart's own board.

Barbara Kyle, director of the Electronics TakeBack Coalition, is skeptical that such an industry-dominated endeavor could produce a meaningful rating scheme. "You end up with manufacturers voting only for criteria that they already meet," she said, adding that many critical issues, such as the durability of products and the impact of toxic inputs on factory workers, are excluded when corporations define sustainability. Kyle, who was on the task force that developed the EPEAT environmental rating system for computers, volunteered to take part in a Sustainability Consortium meeting on electronics, but was rebuffed. "They have all this stuff on their website about transparency and accountability, but they are anything but," she said.[22]

In the first year or two after its founding in July 2009, the Sustainability Consortium was close-lipped about its progress. In the last few months, the consortium has finally said that it is not in fact developing a rating system or even product-specific information. It is assembling general lifecycle data for types of products – a typical environmental footprint for orange juice or detergent, say, but not for specific brands within those categories. Spokesperson Jon Nicol says this data could be a starting point for a rating system should a company wish to develop one. So far, the consortium has finished just 10 assessments.[23] A Walmart supercenter carries roughly 140,000 items across thousands of product types.

Was Walmart woefully naive about what it would take to create the kind of Sustainability Index it promised? Was it a miscalculation to have corporations play a big role in developing environmental standards for their own products? Should Walmart have put its efforts instead into refining and adapting an existing rating system, one not controlled by industry, such as GoodGuide? Was the index just a PR ploy from the start?

Raising questions about Walmart's sustainability questionnaire

Although the Sustainability Index may never materialize, Walmart has been taking environmental issues to manufacturers in other ways. The company sent all of its suppliers a "sustainability assessment" in 2010, asking them to answer 15 questions about their practices.[24] But that survey has been criticized by some sustainable business experts. Joel Makower, a green business strategist, described the questions as "superficial at best, voluntary in nature, and the answers are largely yes-or-no, self-reported, and unverified."[25] Some suppliers privately grumbled that the survey was merely a tool for Walmart to better understand their cost structures and use that knowledge against them.

In China, where Walmart sources roughly 70 percent of everything it sells, the company has been undertaking other efforts. In 2008, Walmart organized a Sustainability Summit for its Chinese suppliers. Both outgoing CEO Lee Scott and incoming CEO Mike Duke gave speeches to the more than 1,000 attendees. Much of the coverage of the event framed it as Walmart getting tough with suppliers: You had better dramatically reduce the environmental impact of your factory or we'll stop buying your goods.

What the company's executives actually said was that Walmart had two main environmental goals for its Chinese suppliers. The first: "we will require all our suppliers here to clearly demonstrate their compliance with Chinese environmental laws and regulations."[26] In other words, Walmart will no longer look the other way when its suppliers violate water-pollution and air-pollution laws. It's good that Walmart is now on the side of the law, but then what are we to make of the company's previous assertions over the years that its sourcing practices were ethical?

Walmart's second stated objective was: "By 2012, our goal is for the top 200 factories we source from directly in China to achieve 20 percent greater energy efficiency."[27] There is plenty of low-hanging fruit when it comes to energy efficiency in China's industrial sector and Walmart seems to be picking some of it. It has a clear financial incentive: Reducing energy use cuts costs, which presumably could result in Walmart paying suppliers less. In December 2010, the Environmental Defense Fund, which, at the time, was working in China to help Walmart achieve these reductions, reported that the company was on track to meet this goal by 2012.[28] Among the success stories that Walmart likes to highlight is the towel-maker Loftex, which has cut its electricity use by 25 percent and water use by 35 percent.[29]

But the top 200 factories in China constitute less than 1 percent of the 30,000 factories in the country supplying Walmart, so a key question going forward is whether the others will follow in large numbers and in a way that can be verified. "[E]nergy efficiency in supplier factories still seems to be viewed as extracurricular by Walmart managers. It is not, in the lexicon of the Walmart world, seen as a 'core activity,'" wrote Andrew Hutson, a project manager for corporate partnerships at EDF, in a blog post last December.[30] Hutson said the program lacked mandates for supplier participation and a solid system for measuring progress. "For the program to be impactful and meet its potential, it needs to up its game. Dedicating sufficient resources to get the job done would be a good place to start," he wrote.

So far, there's no evidence that Walmart's purchasing patterns have been changed at all by the answers it's received to its questionnaire, by its energy-efficiency efforts with Chinese suppliers, or by the Sustainability Index program. Aside from a handful of examples like concentrated laundry detergent and CFL bulbs, it doesn't appear that greener products are edging out more damaging ones on Walmart's shelves. The company has not established incentives for its buyers to favor more environmentally friendly products; their performance continues to be measured on sales volume and profit margins. Walmart also refuses to make longer-term purchasing commitments to its suppliers, which leaves many wary of investing in new technologies that may take years to pay off.

While Walmart may have made sustainability part of its conversation with manufacturers, so far this has done little to alter business as usual.

Aside from a handful of examples, it doesn't appear that greener products are edging out more damaging ones on Walmart's shelves. The company has not given its buyers an incentive to favor more environmentally friendly products. Nor has it agreed to make longer-term commitments to its suppliers, many of whom are wary of investing in new technologies that may take years to pay off.

Sprawl: Walmart Ignores Its Biggest Climate Impact

In early 2011, the New Jersey Sierra Club and the Pinelands Preservation Alliance tried but failed to block a permit for a new Walmart supercenter in the small coastal town of Toms River. The development, now moving forward, will destroy habitat for the threatened northern pine snake. What's especially frustrating about the project, local environmentalists say, is that Walmart already has a store in Toms River. It's just a mile down the road and will be shuttered when the new supercenter opens.

The Toms River site is one of several environmentally sensitive areas Walmart aims to pave over in the coming months. Many follow a similar pattern. In Copley, Ohio, Walmart wants to develop 40 acres of fields and wetlands, and then close another store a mile away. In Davie, Fla., the chain is seeking permission to destroy 17 acres of wetlands to build in a location that's just a 15-minute drive from six other Walmart stores.

Even as Walmart has been hyping its supposed environmental epiphany, it has continued to unroll vast, low-rise supercenters at breakneck speed. Since launching its sustainability campaign in 2005, Walmart has expanded the amount of store space it operates in the U.S. by 32 percent. It's added more than 1,100 new supercenters, almost all built on land that hadn't been developed before Walmart showed up. The chain now has 698 million square feet of store space in the U.S., up from 530 million in 2005, plus another 287 million around the globe. Its U.S. stores and parking lots cover roughly 60,000 acres.[31]

Walmart's imprint on our landscape is "their most serious legacy for the environment," according to Kaid Benfield, director of the Sustainable Communities and Smart Growth program at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "In terms of global warming, it's a huge issue," he notes. "Our per-person emissions are much higher in sprawl locations than they are in more walkable locations."[32]

In fact, it's likely that Walmart's land-use impacts indirectly contribute more CO_2 to the atmosphere than all of its reported greenhouse gas emissions combined, including those from the electricity that powers its stores and the fuel that runs its trucks.

And, yet, land use is utterly absent from Walmart's sustainability program. Its 2007 sustainability assessment briefly mentions "the unintended consequences associated with land development." But annual sustainability reports since then have been silent on the issue. Words and phrases like sprawl, compact, mixed-use, pavement, impervious, runoff, auto-oriented, household driving, transit, and pedestrian do not appear anywhere in these reports.

Vacant Walmart stores litter the landscape

In 2012, Walmart plans to open at least 210 new stores in the U.S.[33] A handful of these will be its new Express stores, which, at 10,000-15,000 square feet, are about the size of a Walgreen's; they sell groceries and pharmacy items, and are designed to fit into dense urban areas without triggering a zoning review. But almost all of its new stores will be 185,000-square-foot supercenters built on virgin land at the edge of sprawling communities. Even in cities, Walmart still favors a big suburban-style store with a moat of parking. It only resorts to Express stores where necessity dictates. "They are not replacing the suburban model, but adding to it," says Benfield.[34]

Walmart's development projects often encounter a host of local and state environmental regulations, but the retailer is remarkably adept at getting around them. In California, for example, Walmart has been using the initiative process to evade the requirements of the state's Environmental Quality Act. As Will Evans recently reported on California Watch, by gathering signatures and submitting its development proposals as ballot initiatives, Walmart ensures they won't be subject to the act. Under the initiative process, city governments must either approve the projects outright, with no conditions, or spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to hold a special election. Facing daunting budget problems, most cities just give in. Over the last two years, Walmart has used this technique to secure approval for at least seven new supercenters across the state.[35]

The last thing the U.S. landscape needs is more retail space. At more than 40 square feet per capita, we now have twice as much retail space as we did in the early 1990s and nearly three times as much as Europe — and a shocking amount of it now sits empty. Even before the recession, Americans were unable to spend enough to support all of this development. The Denver metro area, which currently has at least 70 vacant big-box stores and a swelling supply of defunct malls, is typical of many American cities.[36]

Walmart's commitment to "zero waste," which has led it to recycle a growing share of waste at its stores, does not, unfortunately, extend to reusing cast-off retail space — not even its own. The company's realty website lists 150 available Walmart stores, some less than a decade old and most located barely a stone's throw from a new supercenter.[37] Apparently, Walmart has found there's more profit to be made by building shiny new stores than by updating and expanding existing ones.

Walmart has signaled that it plans to continue treating its buildings as disposable. When it recently negoti- ated with SolarCity to put solar panels on some of its California stores, Walmart insisted on 10-year power-purchase agreements, rather than the usual 20 years, because it would not commit to occupying these locations for more than a decade.[38]

How Walmart's sprawl drives climate change

New Walmart stores are made mostly of cement and steel, two materials with high levels of "embodied" carbon, meaning they require a lot of energy to manufacture. These emissions are not counted in Walmart's annual tally of its contribution to climate change. Nor does the company count the impact of turning CO2-absorbing forests and fields into asphalt.

Far more significant, though, is how Walmart's development patterns change our communities, reconfiguring their geography so that day-to-day errands require ever more driving. Between 1990 and 2009 – a period when Walmart grew from a regional chain to a national juggernaut — the number of miles the average American household logged each year for shopping grew by more than 42 percent, according to the National Household Travel Survey. By 2009, the average household was driving nearly 1,000 miles more to and from stores each year than it did in 1990.[39]

Driving in general increased during these years as more people moved to the suburbs, but shopping-related driving expanded six times faster than driving for all other purposes, including work, school, and recreation. Indeed, almost half of the total increase in driving in this period can be attributed to errands. It's not that we're taking more trips to the store. Households still report about 9 shopping trips each week on average. But each of those trips is about 2 miles longer. For the country as a whole, that's an extra 149 billion miles on the road each year.[40]

Not all of this extra driving can be attributed to the rise of Walmart and other big-box retailers, but a sizeable chunk of it can. There used to be many more small and medium-sized stores – independent grocers, pharmacies, hardware stores, and so on – dispersed across city neighborhoods and town centers. Most people only had to go a short distance to pick up something for dinner or buy a can of paint.

This more sustainable pattern, rooted in a time before most families had cars, began to fray with the advent of malls in the 1950s and '60s. But it was the growth of retailers like Walmart, Home Depot, and Target that really decimated neighborhood businesses. While malls mainly sell clothing, the big boxes compete more directly with local stores catering to the day-to-day needs of a community. Today, retail is concentrated in a much smaller number of giant stores, each serving a larger geographic region than the many small stores it replaced. The inevitable result is that most households must drive a few miles more for most errands.

Walmart affects more than just shopping. Its arrival often shifts traffic patterns so dramatically that other businesses, and even institutions like churches and schools, are compelled to abandon older neighborhoods and move to the new center of activity, making every aspect of life more auto-dependent. "What they do on the landscape is hugely influential," notes Kaid. "In many cases, [Walmart] went early to a location, not late. It's partly a result of how much land they want to use. From their point of view, they couldn't follow suburban development and still get that much land at a price that they wanted to pay. They go early and more sprawl comes in around them."[41]

The climate implications of all this are huge. To get a sense of the magnitude, say we attribute 10 percent of the *increase* in shopping-related driving since 1990 to Walmart. That's probably conservative given how fast the company grew and the degree to which its stores have altered land use and traffic patterns, but 10 percent is Walmart's current share of retail spending, so it's a fair number to use. That would mean Walmart's share of the extra miles driven is resulting in more than 5 million metric tons of CO_2 emissions each year in the U.S. That's almost a quarter of the company's reported global CO_2 emissions, which were at 21 million tons in 2009. Add in all of the other untallied climate effects of Walmart's sprawl strategy and you can see how the company's true carbon footprint balloons.

So, while Walmart claims to be taking a leadership role on climate change, it is refusing to address – or even acknowledge – one of the most significant ways its practices affect the earth's atmosphere.

Walmart's land-use impacts indirectly contribute more CO_2 to the atmosphere than all of its reported greenhouse gas emissions combined. And, yet, land use is utterly absent from Walmart's sustainability program.

Walmart Spends Big to Help Anti-Environment Candidates

In 2006, Walmart made headlines when its vice president for corporate strategy and sustainability, Andrew Ruben, told a congressional committee that the company "would accept a well-designed mandatory cap-and-trade system for greenhouse gases."[42] Other major U.S. companies had spoken favorably of cap-and-trade, but Walmart made a bigger splash. Not only was it America's second-largest corporation; it also had deep roots in the country's coal-burning heartland.

But even as Ruben was delivering his testimony, Walmart's political action committee (PAC) was funneling a river of campaign cash into the coffers of lawmakers who would ensure that the U.S. did absolutely nothing to curb its greenhouse gas emissions. During the 2007-2008 election cycle, 80 percent of Senate campaign contributions that came from Walmart's PAC and large donors employed by the company went to senators who helped block the Lieberman-Warner cap-and-trade bill, according to data on political giving published by the Center for Responsive Politics.[43] (When the bill arrived on the floor in 2008, it came up 12 votes shy of the 60 needed to overcome a filibuster.)

Over the last decade, Walmart has emerged as one of the country's largest funders of political campaigns. Its dollars skew heavily in favor of candidates who routinely vote against the environment. Since the company launched its sustainability campaign in 2005, 40 percent of the $3.9 million it has given to members of Congress went to those who have lifetime scores of 20 or less on the League of Conservation Voters' National Environmental Scorecard – meaning they vote against the environment 80-100 percent of the time. Another 19 percent went to those who vote against the environment 50-79 percent of the time.

Walmart's largest donations have gone to some of the nation's most powerful climate-change deniers. Since 2005, Walmart's PAC has given $25,000 to House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio ("the idea that carbon dioxide is a carcinogen that is harmful to our environment is almost comical"[44]); $30,000 to Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo. ("there isn't any real science to say we are altering the climate path of the earth"[45]); and $29,500 to Sen. John Boozman, R-Ark.

("you can look back at some of the previous times when there was no industrialization, you had these different ages, ice ages, and things warming"[46]).

Walmart gets political

Walmart wasn't always a big political donor. Sam Walton, the company's founder and leader until his death in 1992, didn't believe in supporting campaigns. That view largely held through the 1990s, when Walmart's donations at the federal level never exceeded $250,000 during an election cycle. Then, in the early 2000s, facing increasing opposition and a spate of state and federal bills that could affect its bottom line, Walmart decided it had to curry favor. It sharply increased both its political donations and its lobbying. Over the last five election cycles, Walmart has contributed over $8.5 million to federal candidates and political parties, making it one of the largest corporate donors in the country.[47]

Between 2000 and 2006, Walmart gave nearly 80 percent of its federal contributions to Republicans, but by 2008, that figure had dropped to 55 percent. Still, the company pushed hard to defeat Barack Obama, as revealed in an embarrassing front-page *Wall Street Journal* story in August 2008.[48] The article described how the company was holding mandatory meetings for store managers and department heads to make it clear that voting for Obama was tantamount to welcoming unions into Walmart.

The exposé came at a bad time. Walmart had launched a sophisticated PR operation to persuade liberals in the Northeast and West Coast, where its expansion plans had run into roadblocks, that it was a changed company and had come to embrace their green and community-minded values. Turning out the vote against their preferred presidential candidate did not fit the script.

Since then, Walmart has made even more of a point of giving to Democrats. *The Washington Post* has reported that the company now provides as much support to Democrats as Republicans.[49] In the 2010 cycle, 53 percent of Walmart's federal-level donations went to Democrats.

But a closer look reveals that Walmart's giving is not so even-handed. In the Senate, Walmart has continued to favor Republicans, helping them turn the chamber into a major roadblock preventing federal action on climate change and other pressing issues. More than two-thirds of Walmart's Senate donations in 2009-2010 went to Republicans.

In the House, more than half of Walmart's contributions went to Democrats in 2009-2010, but the company favored those who tend to vote more like Republicans on environmental issues. Walmart made donations to 46 percent of all House Democrats in 2010, but it funded nearly 70 percent of those who voted against the cap-and-trade bill that passed the House in 2009. Conversely, Walmart supported only 18 percent of the 119 House Democrats who had a perfect score on the LCV's 2010 scorecard.

Lopsided at the state level

Less noticed has been Walmart's campaign funding at the state level, which remains sharply skewed. In 2009-2010, 77 percent of Walmart's donations to state candidates and parties went to Republicans, according to the National Institute on Money in State Politics. Since 2003, the company has given a total of $9.9 million at the state level, with almost 80 percent flowing to Republicans.[50]

Among the top 10 state-level recipients of Walmart's cash during this period are three prominent climate-change-denying governors: Rick Perry (R-Texas), Mitch Daniels (R-Ind.), and Bob McDonnell (R-Va.). Also on the list are Pennsylvania's Gov. Tom Corbett (R) and Lt. Gov. Jim Cawley (R), both of whom have been waging a veritable crusade on behalf of the natural-gas fracking industry.

One state attorney general also made Walmart's top-10 list: Wisconsin's J.B. Van Hollen. His biggest environmental claim to fame came shortly after he took office in 2007, when he unilaterally decided to withdraw Wisconsin from a multi-state lawsuit challenging a Bush administration directive that relaxed rules on coal-burning power plants.

Walmart talks big about sustainability, but doesn't put its campaign money anywhere near where its mouth is. Whatever the company may say about the importance of legislative action on climate change or other environmental issues, its money is signaling the opposite, telling lawmakers that it's perfectly fine to vote against environmental protection.

Less noticed has been Walmart's campaign funding at the state level, which remains sharply skewed.

Walmart's Takeover and Transformation of Our Food System

Aubretia Edick has worked at a Walmart store in upstate New York for 11 years, but she won't buy fresh food there. Bagged salads, she claims, are often past their sell-by dates and, in the summer, fruit is sometimes kept on shelves until it rots. "They say, 'We'll take care of it,' but they don't. As a cashier, you hear a lot of people complain," she said.

Edick blames the problems on the store's chronic understaffing and Walmart's lack of respect for the skilled labor needed to handle the nation's food supply. At her store, a former maintenance person was made produce manager. He's often diverted to other tasks. "If the toilets get backed up, they call him," she said.[51]

Tracie McMillan, who did a stint working in the produce section of a Walmart store while researching her forthcoming book, *The American Way of Eating*, reports much the same. "They put a 20-year-old from electronics in charge of the produce department. He didn't know anything about food," she said. "We had a leak in the cooler that didn't get fixed for a month and all this moldy food was going out on the floor." Walmart doesn't accept the idea that "a supermarket takes any skill to run," she said. "They treated the produce like any other kind of merchandise."[52]

That's plenty to give a shopper pause, but it's just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to reasons to be concerned about Walmart's explosive expansion into the grocery sector.

Growth of a giant

In just a few short years, Walmart has become the most powerful force in our food system, more dominant than Monsanto, Kraft, or Tyson.

It was only 23 years ago that Walmart opened its first supercenter, a store with a full supermarket inside. By 1998, it was still a relatively modest player with 441 supercenters and about 6 percent of U.S. grocery sales. Last year, as its supercenter count climbed above 3,000, Walmart captured 25 percent of the $550 billion Americans spent on groceries.[53]

As astonishing as Walmart's national market share is, in many parts of the country the chain is even more dominant. In 29 metro markets, it accounts for more than 50 percent of grocery sales.[54]

Seeking an even bigger piece of the pie, Walmart is campaigning to blanket New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and other big cities with its stores. It has made food the centerpiece of its public relations strategy. In a series of announcements over the last year, Walmart has deftly commandeered high-profile food issues, presenting itself as a solution to food deserts, a force for healthier eating, and a supporter of local farming.

It is a remarkably brazen tactic. On every one of these fronts, Walmart is very much part of the problem. Its expansion is making our food system more concentrated and industrialized than ever before. Its growth in cities will likely exacerbate poverty, the root cause of constrained choices and poor diet. And the more dominant Walmart becomes, the fewer opportunities there will be for farmers markets, food co-ops, neighborhood grocery stores, and a host of other enterprises that are beginning to fashion a better food system – one organized not to enrich corporate middlemen, but to the benefit of producers and eaters.

The big squeeze

Walmart's rise as a grocer triggered two massive waves of industry consolidation in the late 1990s and early 2000s. One occurred among supermarkets, as regional titans like Kroger and Fred Meyer combined to form national chains that stood a better chance of surviving Walmart's push into groceries. Today, the top five food retailers capture half of all grocery sales, double the share they held in 1997.[55]

The second wave of consolidation came as meatpackers, dairy companies, and other food processors merged in an effort to be large enough to supply Walmart without getting crushed in the process. The takeover of IBP, the nation's largest beef processor, by Tyson Fresh Meats is a prime example. "When Tyson bought IBP in 2001, they said they had to do that in order to supply Walmart. We saw horizontal integration in the meat business because of worries about access to the retail market," explained Mary Hendrickson, a food systems expert at the University of Missouri.[56] Four firms now slaughter more than 80 percent of cattle.[57] A similar dynamic has played out in nearly every segment of food manufacturing.

"The consolidation of the last two decades has created a food chain that's shaped like an hourglass," noted Wenonah Hauter, executive director of Food & Water Watch, explaining that a handful of middlemen now stand between 2 million farmers and 300 million eaters.[58]

Their tight grip on our food supply has, rather predictably, come at the expense of both ends of the hourglass. Grocery prices have been rising faster than inflation and, while there are multiple factors driving up consumer costs, some economic research points to concentration in both food manufacturing and retailing as a leading culprit.

Farmers, meanwhile, are getting paid less and less. Take pork, for example. Between 1990 and 2009, the farmers' share of each dollar consumers spent on pork fell from 45 to 25 cents, according to the USDA Economic Research Service. Pork processors picked up some of the difference, but the bulk of the gains went to Walmart and other supermarket chains, which are now pocketing 61 cents of each pork dollar, up from 45 cents in 1990.[59]

Another USDA analysis found that big retailers have used their market power to shortchange farmers who grow apples, lettuce, and other types of produce, paying them less than what they would get in a competitive market, while also charging consumers inflated prices.[60] In this way, Walmart has actually helped drive overall food prices *up*.

What Walmart means when it says "local"

In October 2010, Walmart announced that it would double the share of local produce it sells, from 4.5 to 9 percent, over six years.[61]

This doesn't necessarily mean shoppers will soon find a variety of local produce at their nearest Walmart, however. Walmart counts fruits and vegetables as local if they come from within the same state. It can achieve much of its promise by buying more of each state's major commodity crops, such as peaches in Georgia and apples in Washington, and by using big states like California, Texas, and Florida, where both supercenters and large-scale farming are prevalent, to pump up its national average.

"It speaks to the weakness that we've all known about, which is that 'local' is an inadequate descriptor of what we want," said Andy Fisher, former executive director of the Community Food Security Coalition. "It's not just geography; it's scale and ownership and how you treat your workers. Walmart is doing industrial local."[62]

Walmart's sourcing is becoming somewhat more regional, but the change has more to do with rising diesel prices than a shift in favor of small farms. It's a sign that Walmart's Achilles heel – the fossil-fuel intensity of its far-flung distribution system – might be catching up with it. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, trucking produce like jalapeños across the country from California or Mexico has become so expensive that the retailer is now seeking growers within 450 miles of its distribution centers.[63]

"They see the writing on the wall. They know the cost of shipping from California back to Georgia and Mississippi is high now," said Ben Burkett, a Mississippi farmer who noted that Walmart is now meeting with producers in his region. He's hoping to sell the chain okra through a cooperative of 35 farmers. "We'll see. My experience in the past with Walmart is they want to pay as little as possible."[64]

That skepticism is shared by Anthony Flaccavento, a Virginia farmer and sustainable food advocate. "If multimillion-dollar companies like Rubbermaid and Vlasic can be brought to their knees by the retail behemoth, how should we expect small farmers to fare?" he asks.[65]

Walmart's promise to increase local sourcing is reminiscent of its pledge five years ago to expand its organic food offerings. "They held true to their corporate model and tried to do organics the same way," said Mark Kastel of the Cornucopia Institute.[66] For its store-brand organic milk, for example, Walmart turned to Aurora Organic Dairy, which runs several giant industrial milking operations in Texas and Colorado, each with as many as 10,000 cows. In 2007, the USDA sanctioned Aurora for multiple violations of organic standards.[67] In 2011, the agency stepped in again, this time revoking the organic certification for Promiseland Livestock, which had been supplying supposedly organically raised cows to Aurora.[68]

These days, Walmart's interest in organic food seems to have ebbed. "Our observation is that they sell fewer organic products and produce now than four years ago," said Kastel. Ronnie Cummins of the Organic Consumers Association agrees. Today, he says, "the proportion of their sales that is organic is the lowest of any major supermarket chain."[69]

Leveraging food deserts

Walmart has renewed its push to get into big cities, after trying and failing a few years ago. This time the company has honed a fresh strategy that goes right to the soft underbelly of urban concerns. In July, Walmart officials, standing alongside First Lady Michelle Obama, pledged to open or expand as many as 300 stores "in or near" food deserts.[70]

Walmart sees underserved neighborhoods as a way to edge its camel's nose under the tent and then do what it's done in the rest of the country: open dozens of stores situated to take market share from local grocers and unionized supermarkets. Stephen Colbert dubbed the strategy Walmart's "Trojan cantaloupe." For example, an analysis by Manhattan Borough President Scott

Stringer's office estimates that if Walmart opens in Harlem, at least 30 supermarkets, green grocers, and bodegas selling fresh produce would close.[71]

For neighborhoods that are truly underserved, it seems hard to argue with the notion that having a Walmart nearby is better than relying on 7-11 and McDonald's for meals. But poor diet, limited access to fresh food, and diet-related health issues are a cluster of symptoms that all stem from a deeper problem that Walmart is likely to make worse: poverty. Poverty has a strong negative effect on diet quality, a 15-year study recently concluded, and access to a supermarket makes almost no difference.[72]

Neighborhoods that gain Walmart stores end up with more poverty and food-stamp usage than communities where the retailer does not open, a study published in *Social Science Quarterly* found.[73] This increase in poverty may owe to the fact that Walmart's arrival leads to a net loss of jobs and lowers wages, according to research by economists at the University of California-Irvine and Cornell.[74]

Walmart has also been linked to rising obesity. "An additional supercenter per 100,000 residents increases … the obesity rate by 2.3 percentage points," a recent study concluded. "These results imply that the proliferation of Walmart supercenters explains 10.5 percent of the rise in obesity since the late 1980s."[75]

The bottom line for poor families is that processed food is cheaper than fresh vegetables — and that's especially true if you shop at Walmart. The retailer beats its competitors on prices for packaged foods, but not produce. An Iowa study found that Walmart charges less than competing grocery stores for cereals, canned vegetables, and meats, but has higher prices on most fresh vegetables and high-volume dairy foods, including milk.[76]

The future of food?

We stand to lose a lot if Walmart keeps tightening its grip on the grocery sector. Signs of a revitalized food system have been springing up all over — farmers markets, urban gardeners, neighborhood grocers, consumer co-ops, CSAs — but their growth may well be cut short if Walmart has its way. "People need to keep an eye on the values that are at the root of what is driving so much of this activity around the food system," said Kathy Mulvey, policy director for the Community Food Security Coalition.[77]

Walmart is pushing us toward a future where food production is increasingly industrialized, farmers and workers are squeezed, and the promise of fresh produce is used to conceal an economic model that leaves neighborhoods more impoverished.

Conclusion: Four Ways to Hold Walmart Accountable

Walmart's sustainability campaign is not your typical corporate greenwash. It is more complex and clever than that. It has enough substance mixed in with the spin to draw you in. It's easy to get swept up in the big numbers Walmart can roll out — like the 30 tons of plastic hangers it recycles every month — and to be charmed by the very fact of this giant company, with its hard-nosed corporate culture, using a word like "sustainability."

More than a few environmentalists have been won over. With their endorsements and the flood of positive press that seems to follow each of Walmart's green announcements, the company has managed to turn around flagging poll numbers, shift its labor practices out of the limelight, and, most crucially, crank up its expansion machine.

The environmental consequences of Walmart's ongoing growth far outweigh the modest reductions in resource use that the company has made. Walmart's business model and its future success depend on further accelerating the cycle of consumption, industrializing our food supply, and exacerbating sprawl. It's not just Walmart, but also Target, Home Depot, and other big chains. The big-box model is "efficient" only to the degree that many of its costs are borne by the planet and the public at large. As these retailers take over an ever-larger share of the economy, more sustainable enterprises and systems of production and distribution are squeezed out.

Walmart's expansion is not inevitable. The rise of Big Retail, much like Big Ag, has been aided and abetted by government policies and a host of hidden and not-so-hidden subsidies.[78] Lately, though, instead of advocating for new and better policies, mainstream environmental groups having been abetting Walmart's growth and helping to secure its future supremacy. It's time to drop that failing strategy.

Here are four ways that environmentalists and concerned citizens can more effectively respond to Walmart's sustainability campaign.

1. Push the media to hold Walmart accountable

Despite the extensive media coverage of Walmart's sustainability campaign, key facts have gone unreported and crucial issues unexplored. The media have not reported on the miniscule progress Walmart has made toward its oft-repeated goal of being supplied by 100 percent renewable power, for example. Nor have any reporters detailed how, even as Walmart was winning kudos for a public statement in support of government action on climate change, it was funneling millions in campaign cash to lawmakers who would ensure such legislation never became law.

Journalists ought to be digging into issues like this. Given the state of newsroom budgets, however, that's not likely to happen without an assist from the environmental community. There's much that environmental bloggers could do to improve the overall balance of coverage and introduce more critical analysis.

A bigger responsibility lies with mainstream environmental organizations. So far, no group has taken up the task of evaluating what Walmart is and isn't doing compared to what it should be doing, or providing some benchmarks to define what constitutes sustainability in retailing. Without this, journalists will keep taking their cues from Walmart's press releases and the company will continue to reap a public-relations jackpot without any real public accountability.

2. Focus on the right question

Even many environmentalists who support Walmart admit that the company is fundamentally unsustainable. But they frame the debate in terms of a pragmatic acceptance of Walmart's existence. They ask, Isn't it better that Walmart make some improvements than not?

That's the wrong question. Here's the right one: Is allowing Walmart to take over an even larger share of our economy good for the planet? Because by cheering on Walmart's modest sustainability efforts, environmentalists are paving the way for the corporation's future growth. Over the last seven years, since launching its environmental initiative, Walmart has expanded its U.S. operations by one-third. It's now making new inroads in East and West Coast cities, where it sees opportunities to add hundreds of supercenters and push its national grocery market share from one-quarter to one-third or more. Meanwhile, the company's greenhouse-gas emissions are increasing, not shrinking. Worse, Walmart's expansion is driving more sustainable enterprises out of business and precluding the development of others, just as a flurry of new enterprises – locally owned stores, small-scale food producers, farmers markets – are coming online and trying to chart a very different way forward.[79] Environmentalists need to take sides in this fight.

3. Recognize Walmart's economic power as a threat to the environment

Part of the reason Walmart adopted sustainability was that it presented a unique opportunity to transform something that had long been a source of public unease and criticism – the company's size and market power – into a positive. As former CEO Lee Scott said when he unveiled the initiative in 2005, "What if the very things that many people criticize us for – our size and reach – became a trusted friend and ally to all?"[80] Many environmentalists have been quick to adopt this view and expound on how much good a corporation as big as Walmart could do. Given the years of government inaction on pressing threats like climate change, it's no wonder we long to have a powerhouse on our side.

Corporate social responsibility won't get us very far, though. Companies will never forgo profits and make the hard choices needed to avert environmental disaster – unless they are forced to by public policy. But concentrated economic power impedes democratic action. This is partly because economic power invariably translates into political power. Walmart's own political giving and that of groups it funds, like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, are big obstacles to environmental legislation.

Corporate consolidation has also eroded our independence and authority over our own lives.

Few Americans can lay claim to any measure of economic autonomy today. We are increasingly powerless employees and passive consumers. Having acquiesced to an economy run by the likes of Goldman Sachs and Walmart, where “paper or plastic?” is about the most important decision we’re allowed to make, it’s perhaps no wonder that we have become less and less able to marshal the full power of our citizenship to tackle social and environmental issues.

4. Don’t lose sight of labor issues

As it has grown, Walmart has undercut key pillars of the middle class, notably small businesses and unionized jobs in manufacturing and grocery retailing. What it has given us in return are very low-paying jobs in its stores. Here’s a statistic that pretty well sums up the state of Walmart’s workforce: To make ends meet, the company’s 1.4 million U.S. employees each require an average of $943 a year in food stamps, Medicaid, and other public assistance.[81] Most of the millions of other people around the globe employed directly or indirectly by Walmart are faring even worse.

It is a mistake for environmentalists to ignore their plight. Some of the reasons go to the very substance of sustainability. Poverty necessitates short-term decisions that are bad for the planet, and ultimately more expensive, like buying a $6 toaster whose lifespan is likely to be measured in weeks, not years. What’s more, devaluing human resources is part and parcel of the industrial machine. What commonly distinguishes sustainable from unsustainable enterprises is the importance placed on human skills and decision-making. It’s one of the main ways sustainable farming differs from industrial agriculture, for example.

Walmart is employing a divide-and-conquer strategy, and progressive activists should be smart enough not to fall for it. As Ronnie Cummins of the Organic Consumers Association put it, “The biggest problem in the progressive movement today is a willingness to sell out others in the movement for the sake of pretending that your issue is the most important issue. Fair trade and fair wages for workers throughout the food chain is all of our problem.”[82] Fair treatment of retail and manufacturing workers around the globe is too. If there’s one concept environmentalists should understand, it’s that everything is connected to everything else.

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