



## Capitalism with a Conscience

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By Nina Utne

With its \$3 million budget, 35 staff members, and larger-than-life reputation for savvy activist aikido, Rainforest Action Network (RAN), recently profiled in the *Ecologist* (Feb. 2006), is a leader in the fight to hold corporations accountable for their actions.

The magazine's Nicola Graydon writes that RAN's nonviolent antics are legendary: A life-sized papier-mâché cow that eats rainforest leaves and defecates styrofoam "whopper" burgers called attention to rainforest damage caused by Burger King's imported beef. Clipboard-equipped activists warned Home Depot shoppers-via leaked store intercom codes-that the wood in aisle 2D was, reports Graydon, "ripped from the heart of the Amazon."

The tactics are effective, concludes the *Ecologist*. After a year of being targeted, Home Depot "told its suppliers it wouldn't buy wood unless it was Forest Stewardship Council certified, slashed imports from Indonesia and Gabon-both notorious for illegal logging-and helped broker a deal between loggers and environmentalists in Chile to prevent the felling of native forests." A number of big retailers followed suit, including Office Depot and Lowe's. As a measure of the sincerity of its conversion, Home Depot subsequently exerted leverage to protect part of an endangered rainforest in British Columbia.

RAN's ongoing focus on the institutions that finance rainforest destruction has also changed the practices of Citibank and Bank of America, among others. In late 2005, according to the *Ecologist*, RAN helped Goldman Sachs formulate a corporate environmental policy.

Now RAN is going to the source of our oil addiction, campaigning to "Jumpstart Ford," whose vehicles have had the worst average mileage among the big eight automakers for the past six years. RAN's campaign demands fuel efficiency of 50 miles a gallon fleet average by 2010 and zero greenhouse gas emissions across the board by 2020.

Groups like RAN are right to target corporate practices for reform. What's both encouraging and, to some, surprising is that a growing number of entrepreneurs and executives share these activists' agenda, at least to some degree. They are reshaping the trajectory of corporate velocity, inventing new business structures that embed mission into the bottom line, and demonstrating that the impetus for change and for meaningful response to global crisis is a lot more likely to come from businesses (and social entrepreneurs) than from our government. In our cover section, "The New Capitalists" (page 38), we explore how businesses are leading the way.

And well they should. Business is just another word for trade, as author, entrepreneur, and activist Paul Hawken said to me recently, and trade has always been a civilizing activity because it is based on trust and breaks down barriers. The inherent flaw of capitalism, as opposed to trade, is that it is less expensive to destroy the earth than to take care of it. When corporate structures are designed to make the growth of capital an exclusive ideal, money becomes the measure of life flow, and life, inevitably, loses.

As the realities of our vulnerability to climate change (and the causes and effects of the war in Iraq) begin to trickle up to mainstream consciousness, the lines between good guys and bad guys get blurred. Ilyse Hogue, a RAN campaign director, tells the Ecologist, "We forget corporations are made up of human beings, many of whom have children and who are as concerned with the future of the planet as we are. Also, the people at the top of these companies don't get there by accident: They are some of the brightest, most creative minds in business, so we often find that once we've alerted them to the actualities of the issues, the brutal facts, many of them can become very motivated."

According to one interpretation of Hindu scripture, we are at the end of the Kali Yuga or iron age, a time of decadence, despair, and destruction. The end of the world as we know it. The good news is that the Kali Yuga is followed by the Satya Yuga, a golden age of paradise on earth. Hawken wryly observes that capitalism, because its nature is to speed things up, is the perfect system to hasten us into the Satya Yuga.

The question is how we get from here to there, and how much suffering we must endure along the way. But there is a certain elegance in the possibility that the speed of capitalism, which has contributed so mightily to bringing us to this precipice, may also help provide the momentum to make the shift.