

From Julia Roberts to David Cameron, a well-heeled eco-elite are adopting environmental causes wholesale. The problem is – it's at the expense of everyone else, argues **LUCY SIEGLE**



HOW GREEN GOT POSH

Eco-living has been on quite a journey, rising from a knit-your-own-tofu-hat weirdness that smacked of deprivation to become the glossy cover star of *Vanity Fair*. The remoulding of an ecologically benign approach to life into something aspirational appears almost complete. This should keep people like me happy. After all, I have spent the past seven years trying to make eco issues cool and accessible. But I know I'm not the only environmental writer viewing this emerging eco-beast with the kind of guilt-laden trepidation that Frankenstein reserved for his monster.

Only this is hardly a monster, at least in the conventional sense. It's a svelte, gorgeous, Julia Robertsy thing in lovely green taffeta, which talks earnestly yet engagingly about the end of oil and takes climate change very seriously. And significantly, when it comes to making the style pages and gossip columns, it's got the pretty and well-heeled crowd in thrall. You'll find the eco-elite hanging out in New York, London and other eco-hubs, such as Bristol and Manchester. In effect, this is the clique formerly known as cultural creatives, recast as proponents of "lifestyles of health and sustainability". I stress that this should have made me happy: youngish people engaging with eco issues. But call me naive (or green, ha ha) but what I hadn't banked on was the meteoric rise of the eco-elite at the expense of everyone else.

Emerging eco-warriors might be forgiven for thinking that all they need do in order to save the planet is crack open a few Innocent smoothies and make sure their gap year is remotely connected to water conservation. In the latest British issue of *Harper's Bazaar* Kim Hersov, editor-at-large and member of the Serpentine Gallery council, gamely offers herself up for an eco-challenge. "Could she – a sleekly groomed, luxury-loving urbanite – become an urban eco-warrior? She's not an obvious candidate for green living," the copy warns us. I beg to differ. Married to a hugely wealthy South African businessman and with a home

in South Kensington, she is, in my opinion, a prime candidate for a posh eco make-over. And lo and behold, she does pretty well. The overall eco-message coming out at the moment, however, is troubling: if you want to be green, it really helps if you're minted.

I refer again to May's *Vanity Fair* parade of viridian lovelies. On the cover we have Julia Roberts, George Clooney, Robert F Kennedy Jr and Al Gore, the greatest green president that never was. Granted, the current UK poster boy is less predictable. After all, he is David Cameron – shoring up his green credentials by being photographed in that quintessential hippie shoe, the Converse (actually this label is owned by Nike, so Cameron should deduct a number of ethical points); cycling to work, as we are told a hundred times a day; and having his Notting Hill home retrofitted by Alex Michaelis, the eco-architect of the moment. However, Cameron is reported to be spending up to £15,000 on his eco-refit, which will include a rooftop wind turbine, if planning permission goes his way, that could generate 30 per cent of his home's energy. These kinds of innovations remain prohibitively expensive for people in the real world.

But really, the annexation of green issues by the terminally well-heeled shouldn't have been a surprise. There has long existed a degree of forelock tugging in British environmentalist circles. Being naturally bolshie, I've been suspicious of Prince Charles's stranglehold on the organic scene. I appreciated his advice on wearing jumpers to combat global warming, but what about the carbon emissions generated by the private jets that he charters?

Zac Goldsmith, editor of the *Ecologist* magazine, wears his green-blue blood better. An authoritative speaker, he dispenses good, practical eco advice, and for a minute you can forget that he's as rich as Croesus. But only for a minute, as he is, of course, a member of an elite eco-dynasty: Teddy Goldsmith, his uncle, was the original owner/editor of the *Ecologist*, while his brother, Ben, dishes out environmental grants via the Manuka Club.



How to spot a member of the eco-elite

- Hasn't quite managed to turn veggie, but eats only game shot in the wild
- Dresses in as much vintage, recycled, organic cotton as possible
- Employs two eco-consultants on a retainer
- Offsets trips to California through a Clean Stoves to Madagascar project
- Has name down for the recently unveiled Steam Direct Drive washing machine from LG, which uses 35 per cent less water and 21 per cent less energy
- The second car is a G-Wiz electric vehicle
- Member of the Holland Park-based eco-club that meets on Thursday evenings at an organic pub to discuss issues such as overpackaging

Not that Johan Eliasch, the sports apparel magnate and deputy treasurer of the Conservative Party, would need any eco financial assistance. He recently snapped up 400,000 acres of Amazon rainforest for £8m. True, he has pledged to set this aside, but private conservation projects are fraught with issues, not least over how to police the forest from illegal logging. Seen in a favourable light, it can be termed tree hugging, I suppose, but tree hugging done in a way only the eco-elite know how.

Central to the inexorable rise of eco-living is the extraordinary rise of ethical consumerism in the UK. The most recent statistics, compiled by the Co-operative Bank, showed that Britons spent £25.8bn on ethical goods and services in 2004, up 15 per cent on the previous year. It seems there is no shortage of consumers willing to step up to the ethical plate, but what is interesting/troubling, depending on where you stand, is just how many products are aimed at the eco-elite market. From sustainable camping stoves to paraben-free cosmetics, products are prefaced with the words "luxury eco", with a higher price tag to go with the label.

The emphasis on the luxury eco-market includes food – organic food still attracts huge premiums of 40 per cent and upwards. Small wonder that research by the Fraser Consultancy, polling just over 1,300 consumers, pointed to increasing polarisation. Whereas low-income consumers wanted to do the right thing, they found it was financially unviable. For carbon emissions, however, the position is reversed. The lower your income, the lower your emissions are likely to be. Affluence breeds bigger footprints, not least because it encourages unsustainable trends such as one-person households and far-flung experiential holidays to "eco-resorts". Many members of the eco-elite clock up more carbon emissions than a family of Burberry fans with a pit bull could ever dream of.

This is something of a global truth. The richest fifth of the world consumes 58 per cent of all energy used by humans (and is therefore responsible for the ensuing carbon emissions – 53 per cent of all human-generated CO₂). The poorest fifth consumes less than 4 per cent. In the US, Majora Carter, an urban revitalisation

strategist, has controversially set out to "green the ghetto". The big issue for Carter, originally from the South Bronx, is environmental racism: that her community housed a disproportionate amount of heavy polluting industry and services in comparison to predominantly white, middle- and upper-class areas. This, she claims, is hardly a geographical quirk when you view the US as a whole: 46 per cent of its low-income public housing is within a mile of factories that have reported toxic emissions, and 79 per cent of the residents there are black or Hispanic.

Her response was to set up Sustainable South Bronx, which has a remit that stretches far beyond typical regeneration programmes. It has a cohesive, well-thought-through series of sustainable strategies, delivering fresh food, green transport, sustainable employment and even cleaner air for a historically trampled community. In particular, the food markets, full of local sustainable produce to address the problem of food poverty in the South Bronx, would make most UK sustainability enthusiasts do a double take. The quality and abundance of the goods on offer make you think of a farmer's market or Slow Food gathering, celebrating epicurean production values. You have to pinch yourself to remember that this is a low-income area. In the UK, such quality of produce is still mostly found only in high-income areas.

The farmer's market ideal has largely failed to move out from high-end areas, where producers can charge a premium. At the same time, street markets in low-income neighbourhoods remain under threat from supermarkets and burger joints.

As Carter has demonstrated, real initiatives require widespread grass-roots participation. It is often said, for example, that if every house in Britain were to change just two light bulbs to low-energy equivalents, we could, in theory, decommission one power station. Nobody knows exactly how many of the eco-elite it takes to change a light bulb, but there are nothing like enough of them to make a difference. The cool, green shimmering path towards eco-elitism is really leading nowhere.

Lucy Siegle's ethical living column appears weekly in the Observer Magazine

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