

'Greenwashing': Does plant-based marketing mislead consumers about sustainability?

"Greenwashing" is the term used to describe the promotion of a product based on misleading claims of superiority to other products in terms of environmental impact or safety. For example, many cleaning products these days advertise that they are "plant-based" with the implication that these are somehow more environmentally friendly than ones that are formulated with synthetic ingredients. There are several issues here.

First, there is the bogus notion that natural substances are inherently safer. You would not want to roll around in a patch of poison ivy or stinging nettle and the pollen that causes the misery of allergies comes from plants. Improperly prepared cassava is a source of cyanide, tropane alkaloids in belladonna are so toxic that eating a few leaves or berries can be fatal and raw castor beans contain ricin, a compound so toxic that it has been used as a chemical weapon.

The safety or efficacy of a substance is not determined by its ancestry. It is determined by careful studies not by whether it originates in a plant or a lab.

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