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The flip side of Natural American Spirit: corporate social responsibility advertising

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The flip side of Natural American Spirit cigarette packs now align the brand with 'Respect for the Earth', a corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaign. It champions a '100% zero-waste-to-landfill' manufacturing facility, 'earth-friendly tobacco', easier pack recycling, and 'U.S.-grown tobacco' (figure 1). Such marketing appeals to biospheric values, with emphasis on the intrinsic value of the ecosystem, implying a moral imperative to act pro-environmentally.¹⁻³ Biospheric values inspire consumers to pay a premium for products perceived as eco-friendly, such as energy-efficient appliances and organic foods.³ Notably, the market share for premium-priced Natural American Spirit increased by more than 400% since 2002,⁴ even as the number of cigarette smokers in the USA declined to a record low.⁵

In reality, biospheric values are entirely incompatible with smoking cigarettes of any brand. Mass production of tobacco involves significant environmental costs, including deforestation.^{6,7} Cigarette butts are the leading form of litter globally,⁸ have

a slow rate of decomposition⁹ and release toxic chemicals that are harmful to mammals, insects and marine life.^{10,11} Cigarette smoke contains more than 7000 chemicals, at least 250 of which are known to be harmful (ie, ammonia and hydrogen cyanide),^{12,13} and second-hand smoke is a leading cause of poor indoor air quality.^{14,15} In addition, a growing literature on third-hand smoke indicates that volatile organic compounds and carcinogens remain in carpet, upholstery and on other surfaces.¹⁶

Natural American Spirit is manufactured by Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company (SFNTC), which is a subsidiary of Reynolds American, the company that markets Camel and Pall Mall, among other popular brands in the USA. SFNTC and Reynolds have a history of promoting CSR campaigns with an emphasis on 'greenwashing' the tobacco supply chain.^{8,17-19} Since 1999, SFNTC's campaigns have advertised planting trees, recycling cigarette butts and using wind power in its manufacturing facilities.^{17,18,20} However, we believe that the 'Respect the Earth' campaign is the first example of CSR



Figure 1 Front and back of four types of Natural American Spirit cigarette packs with 'Respect for the Earth' campaign.

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advertising on the pack itself. On-pack advertising is a particularly compelling channel, as pack-a-day smokers would view the CSR campaign upwards of 7300 times per year.

The new CSR advertising on cigarette packs highlights an important gap in tobacco control research and policy. Although the US Food and Drug Administration warned SFNTC about its intent to regulate potentially deceptive labelling of Natural American Spirit as ‘additive-free’ and ‘natural’, the warning does not extend to the on-pack CSR messages.²¹ Research is needed to determine whether exposure to the ‘Respect for Earth’ campaign exacerbates consumer misperceptions of reduced harm that several studies have demonstrated for Natural American Spirit.^{22–25} In addition, media advocacy is needed to counter CSR campaigns and tobacco marketing that appeal to biospheric values. For example, Marlboro’s (recent/2016) ‘Stand for a Million’ sweepstakes encouraged consumers to enroll by using the brand website to vote on where to plant a tree.²⁶ Tobacco education campaigns that highlight the environmental harms of tobacco production and tobacco waste (eg, <http://tobaccofreeca.com/environment/cigarette-butts-are-toxic-to-the-environment/>) are essential to counter tobacco industry efforts to portray themselves and their products as environmentally friendly. Future research should test whether such countermarketing could reduce the appeal of marketing efforts to portray the world’s deadliest consumer product and its manufacturers as friends of the earth.

Contributor JJP and LH proposed the study. AEE and LH identified the advertisements. Literature review and manuscript preparation were completed by AEE, JJP and LH.

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Competing interests AEE is an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma (a federally recognised American Indian tribe). JJP has consulted to Pfizer, which makes smoking cessation medications, and has been an expert witness for plaintiffs’ counsel in court cases against tobacco companies. LH is a contractor for the California Tobacco Control Program and has consulted to the Food and Drug Administration’s Center for Tobacco Products.

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