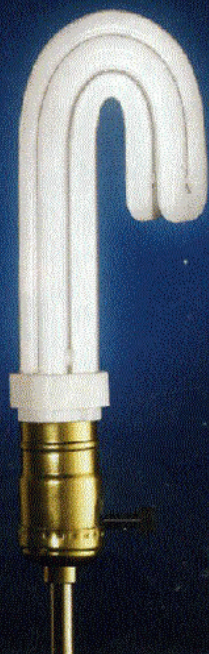


code green → the revolution starts now

BY ELIZABETH HIGHTOWER



## The Thrill Is Gone

In 2007, green was the new black. A year later, are eco-celebs and enviro wrist-slappers killing the mood?

THE POLAR BEARS WERE talking about greening up their homes. Their rap number finished—"We got one *chance here!* To find the *solution!* To stop global *pollution!*"—they'd taken off their fuzzy white heads and were wandering through the mass of students assembled at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on this warm November Saturday. A raucous little gathering, it was one of hundreds staged simultaneously by Step It Up, a Web-based, student-focused climate-change group, and part of a much larger four-day student rally in Washington called Power Shift 2007. Wandering around in sunglasses, the dozen members of Polar Bears for Solutions to War & Global Warming

looked even more middle-aged and rhythmless than they had appeared onstage, if that was possible—as if your dad had wandered onto your MySpace page.

The crowd was going off. Next up was Van Jones, a charismatic, 39-year-old activist based in Oakland, California, whose vision of green-jobs training (teaching unemployed people to install solar panels, for example) has taken environmentalism to the inner city. "You go to college," he shouted, joking about how self-righteous newly converted greenies can get, "and you start wearing Birkenstocks and eating *tofu*. And you go home for Thanksgiving and your grandma is happy to see you for about *five seconds*, because you're

going around all 'I don't see anything to be thankful for with this *dead bird* on the table,' making Thanksgiving *awkward* for people. And you're right. But you're annoying."

I heard that. While I've been known to whine plenty at my parents about recycling (sorry, Mom!), I get a little tired of being preached at myself—and we certainly live in preachy times. Brought to you by hour ten of *The 11th Hour* and Jay Leno's \$500,000 solar garage, the result can be a bad case of green fatigue, a strange combination of eye rolling and despair. Sure, we're fed up with the characters on *Las Vegas* doling out eco-tips, but what really wears us down is a deeper anxiety that comes from solutions that seem as overwhelming as the problem. Switch to biodiesel and you're starving the world's poor; run your house on wind power and you're knocking little birds out of the sky. Meanwhile, the planet may be cooking faster than we thought—and we can't afford that \$182 pair of organic jeans to save it.

Was there anybody out there, I wondered, who wasn't suffering from green fatigue? I decided to go look. What I discovered was that while many of us adults are feeling overwhelmed, the younger crowd is just getting started. More specifically, a motley crew of student leaders and urban activists aren't just energizing the environmental movement; they're hijacking it. While we fiddle with the radio, they're driving away in the hybrid car. Using the war in Iraq, energy independence, Katrina, and the economic benefits of new technologies, they're arguing for a clean-energy revolution that, as Jones put it, "lifts all boats." Power Shift, billed as the largest single youth gathering on climate change in history, seemed like the perfect place to find out where this coalition was going—and if they'd get very far.

The first thing I'd noticed when I walked into rally HQ, at the University of Maryland's Cole Field House, was the fresh scent of optimism in the air. Green fatigue? Brown University senior Nathan Wyeth, who at 22 has already served on the board of the Sierra Club, looked puzzled. "Nobody's here to hear about doom and gloom," he said.

Billy Parish, 26, cofounder of the Energy Action Coalition, which organized Power Shift, seconded that. "Unless we're coming out with a positive agenda about what we want to do—not what we don't want other people to do—we're not going to build a grassroots movement," he told me. "This issue is the defining challenge of our

generation, and it creates an opportunity for solving a lot of other problems. Economically, our parents' generation is leaving an incredible burden on us. Ecologically, that burden is even more devastating."

The Power Shift kids seemed bizarrely psyched to clean that mess up. Pouring into the gymnasium was a mix of dreadlocked white kids, African-Americans in shirts and ties, native Alaskans in baggy hoodies, green-necks in trucker hats, everybody stomping on the bleachers as the sound system bumped out Beck's "E-Pro." Onstage, the Reverend Lennox Yearwood, 38, president of the Hip Hop Caucus, issued the call. "The climate movement is changing!" he shouted. "It's white, it's black, it's yellow, it's male, it's

sounds of "We Are the World."

If this movement were just 6,000 students urging Americans to live right, that might well be the end of it. But these protesters were the thin edge of a wedge. Their concerns are echoed by a chorus of big-city mayors, from New York's Michael Bloomberg to San Francisco's Gavin Newsom, by governors in states from Florida to California, by presidential candidates from Hillary to Huckabee—heck, by the entire UN. They're part of a larger group that includes minorities and evangelicals, Iraq veterans, labor unions, and a host of environmental groups now working together under the umbrella coalition ISky, whose goals are the ones adopted by the students on the Hill.

## WE'VE GOT A BAD CASE OF GREEN FATIGUE—BROUGHT TO YOU BY HOUR TEN OF THE 11TH HOUR AND JAY LENO'S \$500,000 SOLAR GARAGE.

female, it's deist, it's atheist, it's straight, it's gay. It's the most powerful movement the world has seen in the 21st century!"

By Monday, after two days of panel discussions, workshops, and speakers ranging from Sustainable South Bronx diva Majora Carter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (whose halting speech was the only one that bombed), the students had worked themselves into a frenzy. They swarmed Capitol Hill to demand three specific goals: no new coal-powered electric plants, five million new green-collar jobs, and an 80 percent reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions by 2050.

Was anybody listening? In Washington, it can be hard to tell. Hundreds of students packed into a hearing room for a special session of the House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming—the largest turnout, said committee chair Edward J. Markey, that he'd seen in 31 years as a legislator. Parish and four students sat rigid before the microphones, testifying, often tearfully, about hunters in coastal Alaskan villages falling through ice, about homes being swept away by Katrina, and about the need for a Clean Energy Corps based on the 1930s Civilian Conservation Corps.

Trouble was, they had an audience of one. Facing them on the dais, Markey listened intently, flanked by 14 empty seats. Since it was Monday morning, House staffers explained, the committee members were still traveling back from their districts. All 14 of them? The message seemed to be: Thanks, kids, we'll catch your act on C-Span. And this made me wonder: Would the causes of this generation fade like the rainforest and baby seals did when I was in college? Back then, a green wave rolled across campuses and Hollywood, then fizzled out to the

Meanwhile, it helps that the Power Shifters are not easily cowed. "We're like dogs," model and organizer Summer Rayne Oakes told me she'd said after Pelosi's speech. "We can smell fear and we have no patience for bullshit." Soon the wave poured over to the West Lawn of the Capitol where thousands more were assembling, a sea of yellow Power Shift T-shirts bobbing under placards that read, ISKY! IFUTURE! ICLIMATE! ICHANCE! Van Jones was there, again igniting the crowd.

Earlier, I'd asked him, "Don't you get worn out?" We were driving to the Lincoln Memorial; he was toting a cold burrito and preparing for his second speech today. Didn't he ever get pessimistic?

He laughed. "See, you have to realize that I'm African-American," he said. "This is not our first bad year. So welcome to our world." Then he got serious.

"Look at Dr. King. There's no reason in the world for him to have given any speech in 1963 except 'I have a complaint! I have a long list of things about which I am thoroughly pissed off!' But look at the speech. Look at the outcome: not perfect, but certainly a lot better than what we had."

Now I felt bad. In the face of such resilience, in the face of the optimism put forth by Jones and the students and even the dancing polar bears, green fatigue suddenly felt silly—and kind of old. The playing field has changed, green has gone broader, and the environmental movement needs all the energy—and all the friends—it can get.

It's not that green fatigue isn't real. It's just that it's a luxury.

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