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# Using Tide to Clean, Doesn't Mean its Green: An Argument Against Greenwashing

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# Using Tide to Clean, Doesn't Mean it's Green

*An Argument Against Greenwashing*

**by Casey Rogers**



*“The Earth’s resources are limited and valuable, and we have an obligation to future generations to use these resources wisely.”*

## **Tide: Safety Statement**

WHEN YOU WASH YOUR CLOTHES, YOU CHOOSE a detergent that touts itself as an eco-friendly detergent. After all, why not help the environment with your everyday activities? You’ve just seen an ad for a new Tide product called Free and Gentle, a Proctor and Gamble creation, telling you all about how great Tide is for the environment. So you go to the store and spend the average \$12 on a bottle that gets you approximately 30 loads. When you look at the back of the bottle, you don’t see a list of ingredients, but if the commercial says it’s good for the environment, you’re sure it is. The product states that it is free of harmful chemicals and scents that can cause irritation. Unfortunately, Proctor & Gamble exaggerates those claims, and when it comes to some products, including Tide Free and Gentle laundry detergent as will be seen, they are guilty of Greenwashing. Greenwashing, according to *The Triple Bottom Line*, a book that defines the pillars of sustainability as people, profits, and the planet, by Andrew Savitz, is defined as “a kind of corporate image-laundering in regard to the environment” (Savitz, & Weber, 2006 pg. 136). In the easiest terms, Greenwashing occurs when marketers make claims about a product’s environmental attributes that are false or cannot be verified. Whether it be chemical ingredients, the amount of liquid used for proper efficiency, or unsubstantiated claims that improperly put Tide ahead of its competitors, there is really only one reason Tide can say it is better than the rest,



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and that is because it is designed to be easier on machines. Overall, it would seem that Proctor & Gamble know how to Greenwash a consumer into buying their “eco-friendly” products rather than providing a detergent that is truly “green.” Overall, it would seem that Proctor & Gamble know how to Greenwash a consumer into buying their “eco-friendly” products rather than providing a detergent that is truly “green”.

Now, you might be asking, “what’s actually in this stuff?” Laundry detergent manufacturers are not required by law to print the ingredients of the detergent on the label. Technically, they are not required to print them anywhere besides in confidential company memos, in order to ensure that the company’s “secret formulas” are protected. Many have tried to explain the roles the consumer can play in examining a product’s environmental qualities, and as was written in “The Role of Management Systems in Stakeholder Partnerships”, “although a consumer can often assess a product’s quality through inspection, the environmental attributes of a product are usually impossible to determine.” (King, 2006, pg 229) The truth is you will rarely get a straight answer if you simply look at the list of ingredients on any detergent. Typically, there is a cryptic message such as “Ingredients include surfactants (anionic and nonionic) and enzymes.” Investigating what that actually means can be quite a challenge. Proctor & Gamble is notorious for not including ingredients whenever possible, however questionable this seems. It would make sense if a company were proud of their ‘green products’ that they would be more forthcoming in publishing what exactly made those products green. Doing a simple analysis of what is published on that label shows quite a different side to the eco-friendly ingredients Tide supposedly uses.

Now, what exactly is a Surfactant? They are, among other things, the first ingredient included on the short list Tide puts on the back of its bottles. To most, it’s just another chemical, but in reality it is much more. Surfactants are a group of synthetic chemicals that are not only slow to biodegrade in the environment but are also known to be toxic to human health. They are used as wetting agents that lower the surface tension of a liquid, allowing easier spreading, and lowering

**Proctor & Gamble is notorious for not including ingredients whenever possible, however questionable this seems.**



of the interfacial tension of a liquid, which is when adhesive forces between one chemical in a liquid state and another chemical in a gaseous, liquid, or solid state interact and have a reaction only on their surfaces. "The dynamics of absorption of surfactants is of great importance for practical applications such as foaming, emulsifying or coating processes, where bubbles or drops are rapidly generated and need to be stabilized." ("Surfactant:," 2010) A study was reported in the paper "Are Leading brand laundry detergents environmentally friendly?" which stated:

*Researchers in England have found that in trace amounts they activate estrogen receptors in cells, which in turn, alters the activity of certain genes. For example, in experiments they (surfactants) have been found to stimulate the growth of breast cancer cells and feminize male fish. One member of this family of chemicals is used as a common spermicide, indicating the general level of high biological toxicity associated with these compounds.(2005)*

In another study, done by the American Society for Microbiology (2001), a surfactant listed on the ingredients found on Tide Free and Gentle's website called Linear Alkylbenzene Sulfonate was found to be extremely harmful to Nitrosomonas and Nitrospira. These two types of bacteria are found in virtually every marine system. Their purpose is to naturally break down enzymes in the water to help create a healthier ecosystem. When these two bacteria were exposed to Linear Alkylbenzene Sulfonate, however, the study showed that the bacteria's growth and metabolic rate slowed dramatically until, after five days, it stopped all together. Without these naturally occurring bacteria, our marine water system's healthy balance is greatly altered, to the extent where we could see entire trophic-levels extinguished in areas, leading to a potential collapse within the food chain. (Brandt, Hesselsoe, Roslev, Henriksen, & Sorenson, 2001) In a comparison between the original Tide and Tide Free and Gentle, Proctor & Gamble has cut down on their use of chemicals. According to Tide.com, Tide Free and Gentle uses 2 less surfactants than the original Tide. The problem with this data, however, is that they do not tell you the actual amounts of each chemical being used, so there is no way to see if a substitution or an addition of another chemical is being used to replace those removed.

It is useful to compare Tide Free and Gentle to a new laundry detergent called



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Method. This detergent is 95% plant based and claims that all of its ingredients are listed on the bottle, with a full description of each chemical used on their website. While Method contains surfactants just as Tide does, Method's surfactants, similar to many other plant-based detergents, are all derived from coconut oil and other natural oils that are readily biodegradable. Every other chemical used in the plant-based detergent is derived from corn sugars, vegetable sources, or other easily biodegradable synthetic sources. Non-biodegradable surfactants are not good for the environment or for human health. Without easier ways to decompose both within our natural environment but also within our own bodies, surfactants should be something to be conscious of in everyday purchases.

To some, the scent of the laundry detergent can be the most appealing aspect of the product, regardless of its environmental implications. It is true that Tide leaves clothes smelling great after washing them; however, it is important to be aware of what actually makes clothes smell so fragrantly. Even in "fragrance-free" detergents, there are some scent-additives because laundry detergent alone does not have a pleasing smell. According to The Simple Dollar, an online magazine that published an article called "Making your own laundry detergent", without the addition of essential oils to make the detergent smell good, you have one of two options: a detergent that smells like vinegar, or a detergent that smells like borax. (Trent, 2008) Chemical groups called phthalates are made to give the fragrance to your laundry detergent, including all of the fragrances in Tide. Many people do not think about the negative effects of fragrance additives in their detergents, however, those fragrances are some of the most harmful parts of the detergent for human health and for the environment. Phthalates tend to be very stable; they do not degrade in the environment easily, and exert toxic effects on fish and mammals.

**One of the phthalates most commonly used in detergents in the United States has been listed as a reproductive toxin in the European Union, said to cause male and female infertility, miscarriages, birth defects, and impaired child development.**



Individuals with sensitivities can experience skin, eye, and nose irritations or allergic reactions that can be caused by these substances. (“Green laundry detergents,” 2010) One of the phthalates most commonly used in detergents in the United States has been listed as a reproductive toxin in the European Union, said to cause male and female infertility, miscarriages, birth defects, and impaired child development. Other phthalates have been banned in the EU because of liver and kidney toxicity as well. (“EUROPA: environment and,” 2010) According to American Chemistry, an organization which advocates for setting exposure limits to chemicals, the correlation between exposure to phthalates and issues of human health has not yet been proven. (“American chemistry: phthalates,”) What needs to be addressed then is how to compare the research of two scientifically recognized groups if their findings on the toxicity of phthalates are so different.

Not only does Tide’s advertising mislead its consumers about its chemical additives, but also about the amount in the bottle in relation to the amount needed for proper washing. The bottle says you should get 32 loads for the 50 oz of liquid in the bottle. The amount of detergent advised to use varies with the brand of detergent and the size of the load to wash. That supposed 32 loads is great as long as you only fill the cup up to the first line, but that first line is only good for “small-medium” loads. According to Tide’s website, “the amount of clothing that equals a medium-sized load is approximately the same as filling the washer up to a medium capacity.” The problem with this is that not every washer has the same capacity. Actually, almost every washer has a different capacity. Consumers are supposed to determine their washer capacity and independently determine how much laundry and detergent constitute a ‘medium-sized’ load.

The question becomes then, how much detergent do we actually need to use? It is important to recognize that the detergent companies are out to sell you (the consumer) detergent. They are going to encourage their customers in any way possible to get them to buy and use Tide detergent. What that does to the environment, however, is to be determined. Proctor & Gamble say their product is eco-friendly because it uses fewer chemicals per load than other detergents. But in reality, according to an article published in Backwoods Magazine titled “Clean up your Act”, Tide users end up using almost twice as much detergent



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if they follow recommended use levels, so twice as many chemicals are being released into our waterways with each load being done due to the lack of a standardized load size and a standardized system of measuring the detergent needed for that load. (Blanchard, 2008) Compare Tide Free and Gentle to Method or similar detergents. Method comes in a bottle that fits in the palm of your hand and is concentrated so it only contains 20 oz. of detergent. According to the bottle's packaging, this 20oz bottle will get you 50 medium sized loads, as is the standard for plant-based concentrated detergents. While the average Tide-user who follows the recommended levels will use about 1.56oz per load, the average Method-user will go through only about .4oz per load, even with slight variations in washer load size.

A common misconception is that a mainstream brand like Tide will clean better than its competitors. The advertisers at Proctor & Gamble are extremely talented when it comes to making consumers believe that their product works better than the rest. Their commercials are some of the best examples of Green washing to date. The commercials state how much more effective Tide is compared to other companies, and how much more satisfied you will be with Proctor & Gamble's product, but their evidence is unsubstantiated. In a news report by CBS titled "Going Green when Cleaning Clothes", a live test was performed to check the claims of the latest and greatest "green" detergents. What the study found was that while Tide Free and Clear worked well, other detergents like Seventh Generation and Naturally Clean worked better. With considerations to the environment, the CBS news professionals suggested using an alternative detergent to Tide whenever possible.

Though Tide may be guilty of Greenwashing, there are some positives to their detergents as well. According to Ken Sapp, a local repairman for Dewaard and Bode, more often than not washing machines break down because the pump stops working. He explained that non-Tide and eco-friendly products (excluding Tide Free and Clear) are notoriously harder on the machine's pumps because they are not as liquefied as Tide. Sapp explained that in almost 80% of the broken pump cases the repair shop gets the owner used an eco-friendly product in the machine for more than half of the machine's life. According to a EurekAlert.org article by American Chemical Society's Judah Ginsberg (2006), Tide was not just made to help clean clothes better;



it was made to revolutionize the washing machine. (Ginsberg, 2006) Looking at Tide.com, under Tide Free and Gentle ingredients, 18 chemicals are listed. Looking at Method detergents website, 14 chemicals are listed, with smaller quantities of both liquid and chemicals. This makes proving that detergents like Method are harder on machines a challenge. Scientists are still researching whether or not there is a proven scientific correlation between machine life and Tide; however, evidence seems to support the argument that Tide products are better for machine life.

Many consumers see the benefit of longer machine life and make that choice. There is evidence to suggest that a Tide product is both better for a machine and worse for the environment, but it is up to the consumer to decide which effect is more important. According to Tide.com, Tide Free and Gentle's number one ingredient is water. It has to be in order for its number two ingredient, Alcholethoxy Sulfate, to be effective in fighting stains. A study by scientists at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, examined the relationship between surfactants and water and found that the relationship between the

**When shopping for a new laundry detergent, remember that it takes more to be eco-friendly than ads, commercials, & appealing label design.**

two was a very exact one. Without enough of the surfactant, the detergent would be ineffective, but without enough water within the detergent the surfactant was proven useless in hitting all of the stain. It was thus proven that with synthetic chemicals, like the surfactants used in Tide Free and Gentle, it was best to

produce a more watered down detergent that could utilize more chemicals. (Boyd-Boland, & Pawliszyn, 1996, pg 1521-1529) On one hand, Tide Free and Gentle is watered down; it uses more chemicals and is worse for the environment than virtually any other eco-friendly detergent, however on the other side, putting a washing machine in a landfill is also not very eco-friendly.

Proctor & Gamble marketers have found a way to pick up on what most human beings feel is desirable in a product and advertise to those specifications. They know consumers want a product which they think is not only going to work well



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but is also going to help them be better stewards of the planet. With Tide Free and Clear, Proctor & Gamble shows ads of happy consumers washing clothes in springs and drying them in meadows while using an eco-friendly product such as theirs. What those commercials leave out though is all of the chemicals that pollute those springs and kill those meadows. While being overall better for washing machines, Tide Free and Clear is guilty of a huge Greenwashing ploy, one that leaves out the harmful chemicals and inefficient liquid standards and over-exaggerates the outcome of the product. When shopping for a new laundry detergent, remember that it takes more to be eco-friendly than ads, commercials, and appealing label design. To get a truly eco-friendly product, make sure to see if the company can substantiate their claims and present you with evidence to show their product is environmentally conscious.



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