

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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## Seattle's green Web sites: Laugh or the planet gets it! Environmentally oriented dot-coms grow, add yucks

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The Emerald City is making it easier for America to go green, with a boomlet of Seattle-based Web sites offering information on so many things environmental -- much of it aimed at 20- and 30-somethings.



Niki Desautels / PI

Chip Giller, founder and editor in chief of Grist Magazine, exhibits some of the personality yesterday that drives his humorous environmental Web site based in Seattle. "We've struck a chord with Generation X and Generation Y," Giller says.

Much of Grist's humor comes in headlines. Some examples:

— On Amazon deforestation by cattle ranching: "The Agony of Beef Eat."

— On the Bush White House killing a program to test chemicals before unleashing them: "No Chemical Left Behind."

— On chemical flame retardants found in people's blood: "If We Weren't Already Fireproof, This Would Burn Us Up."

— On urban sprawl in China: "They've Paved Pears and

Rice and Put Up a Parking Lot."

Humor is a key ingredient responsible for the 6-year-old online magazine's success, its founders say.

"Let's face it: Reading environmental journalism too often feels like eating your vegetables. Boiled. With no butter," Grist explains on its site.

The magazine turned to humor, Grist says, "because of the many things this planet is running out of, sanctimonious tree-huggers ain't one of them."

"I wanted to start something that would appeal to the average Jane or Joe, to provide information to people who wanted to log on and make a difference," said Chip Giller, 34, the founder and editor-in-chief.

"I can't say it was a strategic decision. It came more out of fatigue."

As Giller tells the story, he was lying on the floor of an improvised office "the size of a toothpaste tube." It was about 2 a.m. The Boston native had left behind a perfectly respectable job at the up-and-coming, if wonky, Greenwire environmental news service in Washington, D.C., to launch a Seattle startup. His first edition was due "out" in a few hours. It was a dark and stormy night -- naturally, since this was Seattle in April.

Out of desperation, he and staff editor Lisa Hymas started making puns and other witticisms out of the headlines. It worked. Although it was started in 1999 as an online publication in conjunction with Earth Day 2000, Grist went independent in 2003. It's funded by foundations such as Ford, Tides and Wilburforce, as well as donations by readers.

Some 500,000 people a month either receive Grist news updates by e-mail or visit the site, a number that has roughly tripled in the last three years. Tucked unobtrusively in the back of a brick Pioneer Square-area office building with a view of the port and ferry docks, the staff has grown to 16.

Grist and other sites are tapping readers who are young and, unlike previous generations, much less likely to sign up to become a card-carrying member of an environmental group. Yet they do care -- many deeply -- about the Earth.

The humor "was there to get through the jadedness, the crust of cynicism that most people have. ... I created some-

thing that could appeal to me," said Giller, who confesses to being overly earnest -- and not that funny in person. (Some would disagree.)

"We brought in a number of people who care about the environment, but for whom it isn't their whole life," Giller said. "If the environmental movement doesn't turn itself around, it's going to be left behind."

Grist's growth in recent years has been mirrored by the rise of a number of other Seattle-produced Web sites pushing an environmentalist message. They include:

**Eco Encore.** Got videos? DVDs? Books? CDs? This group, based in Ballard but moving to Sodo, collects the donations of media materials, resells them and turns the profits over to local environmental groups, such as Northwest Environment Watch and the Center for Environmental Law and Policy.

"We're bursting at the seams. We've got tons of inventory and it's going well," said Kristen Spangler, 31, a Peace Corps veteran who took over recently from Jesse Putnam, who founded the site in 2002.

**Sustainable Style.** This Capitol Hill-based site was started two years ago by former Nordstrom personal shopper Sean Schmidt and wardrobe consultant Rebecca Luke after they saw the chaos engendered by the World Trade Organization meeting right outside Nordstrom's doors in 1999. They realized that consumers wanted to incorporate their beliefs in environmental sustainability and fair labor practices into purchasing decisions.

"That just made it hit home that people really care about these things at all levels of society," Schmidt said.

The group says it opts for carrots over sticks. "Better yet we use tiny cocktail carrots ... sometimes even the smallest positive reinforcement can create big change," the Web site says. Its motto: "Look fabulous, live well and do good."

**One Northwest.** The 12-person operation with offices downtown offers technical expertise on the Web to environmental organizations across the Northwest.

So far it has helped more than 700 since being launched a decade ago. The work is heavily subsidized by grants, although One Northwest does charge the groups, said Gideon Rosenblatt, 41, a former Microsoft employee who founded the site.

Now that most groups have Web sites, Rosenblatt said the focus is shifting to, "How do we help these groups do a better job connecting with the public and collaborating with each other?"

**Sustainable Industries Journal Northwest.** This site deals with business opportunities in energy, recycling, green

building and other areas. It is produced from offices in lower Queen Anne, Portland and Minnesota. It was founded in February 2003.

**Action Studio E-Advocacy.** Reifman's 4-year-old site based in Green Lake offers non-profit organizations the ability to direct members to its site to have an e-mail or fax sent to government decision-makers at the state and federal levels in their names. e messages can be personalized. The cost to non-profits is \$49.99 a month. Many of its users are environmental groups, Reifman said, including the Washington Environmental Council and Transportation Choices.

At Grist, much of the early value came from links to other publications' stories.

But the magazine has steadily built its original content, including pieces by respected environmental writers, such as Bill McKibben, author of the best-selling "The End of Nature." One feature is "Ask Umbra," an advice column that handles such weighty matters as whether leaving the lime in your beer bottle screws up the recycling process. (Answer: Leave it in. The lime is burned off.)

Nor is Grist above mining celebrity appeal. Actor-producer-director Ed Norton, who is less known for his promotion of solar energy and other environmental causes, did an interview in April while shooting a picture in Prague.

But Grist values its independence from the environmental movement and its role as a watchdog.

One regular column, Muckraker, by Amanda Griscom Little, mostly tracks developments in national politics affecting the environment -- but with a distinct "outsider" approach.

About a dozen professional writers across America work regularly for Grist. Increasingly, Giller says, the site will be carrying blogs by readers who can report on what's happening right in their own neighborhoods.

Grist is bucking trends in two arenas whose mass appeal is slipping: journalism and environmentalism.

"The environmental movement, sadly, is an aging movement," Giller said. Yet, "We've struck a chord with Generation X and Generation Y."

It's important work. As Grist signs off one of its pages: "So laugh now -- or the planet gets it."

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