

The Last Word on Eco-Labels

With over 300 different eco-labels slapped on packaging, even the most careful consumer can become confused. Good thing Rebecca Clarren is on the case: Writing for **Mother Jones** (Nov.-Dec. 2009), the investigative journalist (whose story "The Dark Side of Dairies" is on p. 42) turns her scrupulous attention to official-looking seals, manufacturers' claims, and familiar feel-good terms.

The emptiest assertions of all—worthy of a "virtually meaningless" ranking—are so common they often fly under the radar. *Hypoallergenic*, for example, has no meaning or standards; the word is a creation of cosmetics advertisers circa 1950. *Fragrance free* merely indicates that a product doesn't have a conspicuous scent; substances that cover up or neutralize odors can still be present. A product labeled *non-toxic* "won't kill your kids if they ingest it," Clarren writes, but still "might contain chemicals that can cause serious health problems."

Clarren likewise gives failing grades to *biodegradable* ("No one enforces this overly broad standard"); *no additives* ("Implies a product doesn't have ingredients like Red No. 40 or MSG. Or not—the maker decides what it means"); and *hormone free* ("Bull. Producers can call beef 'hormone free' even if it contains hormones such as testosterone"). *Natural*, *cruelty free*, and *free range* also flunk her test.

Not all eco-labels are total B.S., of course. Clarren passes the USDA's *Certified Organic* stickers, the Demeter *Biodynamic* label, and the *Certified Humane Raised & Handled* stamp of approval. Co-created by the Humane Society, the *Leaping Bunny* logo is also legit; it indicates no ingredients tested on animals. And while the term *biodegradable* is abused, soaps and cleaners bearing Scientific Certification Systems' *Certified Biodegradable* seal will break down quickly and safely.

