

SPOARTS WASH: EXPOSING IRELAND’S FOSSIL FUEL SPONSORSHIP CULTURE

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Just Forests (2023) *SpoArts Wash: Exposing Ireland’s Fossil Fuel Sponsorship Culture*, Rathcobican, Offaly: Just Forests.



The resource ‘SpoArts Wash: Exposing Ireland’s Fossil Fuel Sponsorship Culture’ covers the practices of ‘sportswashing’ and ‘artswashing’. These are techniques used by fossil fuel companies to improve their public image in the face of potential negative connotations due to the damage they cause to the environment, the climate, and people’s health and human rights. The resource has been developed by Tom Roche of Just Forests, in collaboration with Colm Regan, founder of 80:20, and Peadar King, documentary filmmaker. It is divided into two parts – a

report focused on sports and artswashing by oil company Texaco in the Irish context, and a schools’ resource.

The report is aimed at a diverse audience - arts centres, schools, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), sports clubs, activist groups, and interested individuals - in order to build a campaign to boycott Texaco’s sports and

artswashing activities. The strongest parts of the report are the sections focusing on Texaco owner Chevron's brutal environmental and human rights abuses in Ecuador, and the criminalisation and mistreatment of those trying to hold them to account. In 2011, courts in Ecuador found that Chevron deliberately and systematically discharged billions of gallons of cancer-causing oil waste onto Indigenous ancestral lands in the Amazon region of Ecuador when it operated in the country under the Texaco brand from 1964 to 1992, which caused an epidemic of cancer and other oil-related health problems and decimated Indigenous communities (Sharife, 2021).

This focus in the report takes three parts – an infographic with key points; a write-up by Peadar King of his experiences witnessing the devastation of Indigenous communities in Ecuador caused by Texaco/Chevron's activities; and an article on Stephen Donziger, a human rights lawyer who was criminalised by Chevron for his work in holding the company to account through the courts. Donziger spearheaded the legal case which found Chevron guilty of deliberate oil pollution in the Amazon, leading to devastating human rights and health impacts on Indigenous peoples of the region. Chevron then filed a lawsuit against Donziger in the US courts on charges of extortion and fraud, and the court case was subject to multiple irregularities – for example, the state authorities refused to prosecute, so the judge appointed a private, Chevron-linked law firm to prosecute – and ultimately placed Donziger on house arrest for more than two years, eventually finding him guilty of contempt and sentencing him to the maximum sentence of six months in prison (O'Cearuil, 2022).

Those sections focusing on this history of Texaco in Ecuador are interspersed with information and critique of Texaco's attempts to clean up their image in Ireland through its long-running sponsorship of a children's art competition and more recent support for a sports initiative. Texaco's 'Support for Sports' awards sports clubs €5,000 if they are successful in a judging process; 26 clubs were awarded funding in 2022 (Just Forests, 2023). The report makes a strong case for the hypocrisy of Texaco and calls out their artswashing in Ireland as 'A fuzzy feelgood competition for Irish children, while children in other parts of the world where Texaco extracts its oil painfully suffer from its extractive practices' (Just Forests, 2023: 6). The sports initiative is more recent than the arts

competition, and the resource argues ‘that Texaco USED school teachers and children in Ireland for decades to clean up their image through children’s art and they want to do the same through sport’ (Ibid.: 11).

Fossil fuel companies’ strategies in promoting arts and sports activities, the resource argues, are actively obscuring the destructive reality of fossil fuel extraction, and obstructing climate action. Because of this, climate activists have long called for fossil fuel financing to be removed from cultural institutions. The most prominent example is Liberate Tate’s campaign to end BP’s (formerly British Petroleum) sponsorship of the Tate Art galleries in Britain (Tate, 2015), which achieved its goal in 2016, although BP said their decision to end their relationship with the Tate had nothing to do with climate activists’ demands (Clark, 2016). As the financial corporate world is multiplicitous, companies who are not involved in fossil fuel extraction directly may be financially entangled with them, and also engaging in art- or sports-washing. For example, activists in Northern Ireland have recently been campaigning against Citibank’s sponsorship of an educational exhibition on nature in W5, a science centre in Belfast (Act Now, 2023). Citibank is the second largest financial backer of fossil fuel projects in the world (Bank.Green, 2023).

Just Forests’ report outlines some of the actions they have taken in their campaign against Texaco’s artwashing, including contacting arts centres who have been participating in the children’s arts competition as judges and alerting them to Texaco’s record in Ecuador. The report features some of the positive responses they have received from organisations like the Irish Museum of Modern Art. The report provides template letters for any readers who might want to take similar action, and could form the basis for an action with a group of participants in an educational setting. Just Forests also outlines how people can support their campaign by boycotting Texaco’s sports and art-washing activities.

The second part of the resource – a separate, shorter, document for secondary school teachers – contains a number of activity ideas, such as holding a debate on sports and arts washing, writing an editorial or making a video on sports and artwashing practices. For these activities to work in a classroom setting, some time would need to be given to building knowledge and confidence

around the issues by presenting the information in the main report in a youth-friendly format, and developing deeper methodologies to support the activities. The educational resource also contains a section with links to additional resources and documentaries. For use in any type of educational setting, it might be worth spending some time exploring in more detail the history of Texaco's activities in Ecuador, and overall the significant role of fossil fuel companies in driving climate change through extractive projects. While there is good content in the main report on these points, it is somewhat dispersed and might be hard for some facilitators and participants to follow.

Fossil fuel corporate greenwashing is an important topic in climate change education. Given the urgent need for political action on climate change and the imperative on all sectors of society to push for and make deep, lasting changes to the way the economy works, fossil fuel companies' extremely high profits - and the damaging activities which earn those profits - should no longer be possible as part of a truly sustainable and fair economy. Just Forests' resource is a positive step towards building knowledge and action to counteract fossil fuel companies' greenwashing activities to improve their image.

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