

Study: Clear Environmental Benefits From Using Recycled Paper In National Geographic, Other Magazines

Using recovered fiber in place of virgin fiber for magazine paper has a benefit in 14 of 14 environmental impact categories studied, according to a life-cycle assessment (LCA) issued today by ENVIRON International Corporation (www.greenamerica.org/pdf/NatGeo-LCA-Report-2013.pdf). The study debunks any myths promoted by magazine and paper industries that question the environmental benefits of using recycled fiber in publication-grade paper. The production of magazine paper in the U.S. emits the equivalent of over 7.2 million metric tons of CO₂ each year, or approximately the annual greenhouse gas emissions of over 1.5 million cars.

The National Geographic Society and a number of NGO stakeholders including Green America, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), and World Resources Institute (WRI), collaborated on this multi-year study. The results can be found at: www.greenamerica.org/better-paper-project/.

As a result of the study, National Geographic is now exploring recycled paper options for their publications. If National Geographic does begin using recycled paper in their magazines, they will join a growing list that includes large and small publications such as Fast Company, Audubon, YES!, and Ranger Rick – all of which have been using recycled paper for a long time.

In a public statement National Geographic released today, Chief Sustainability Officer Hans Wegner stated, “The information gleaned [from the LCA report] will further inform our own paper manufacturing purchasing practices, which are developed around the criteria of quality, performance, availability, affordability, and environmental impact.”

“We are very glad that National Geographic is using the results of the ENVIRON study to prioritize recycled paper use in their magazines,” says Frank Locantore, director of the Green America Better Paper Project. “Many other large magazines and smaller periodicals can feel confident about the substantial environmental benefits if they begin using recycled paper in their magazines. And, the Better Paper Project is happy to help them all find the best paper that meets their needs.”

Categories studied in ENVIRON’s LCA include total CO₂-equivalent emissions (i.e., global warming potential), carcinogenicity, eutrophication, wood use and other elements. The stakeholder group identified four key areas where data variability and assumptions might affect results, namely (1) the amount of energy used in pulping, (2) the fuel mix used in pulping, (3) the environmental impact characterization method used in the model, and (4) the method for allocating recycling benefits in the model. The LCA shows that, even considering the range of possible values for these key areas, using recovered fiber reduces negative environmental impacts for the majority of the environmental impact categories studied.

“This study confirms that the best way for publishers to reduce the environmental impact associated with the paper they buy is to increase recycled content,” says Darby Hoover, senior resource specialist, Natural Resources Defense Council. “We hope that National Geographic, as one of the nation’s top producers of nature publications, takes immediate steps to incorporate the highest recycled content into their magazine and other paper purchases, and sets goals for continued improvement in its paper attributes over time.”

“Keeping mature trees alive and absorbing carbon from the atmosphere is crucial to protecting us from the worst effects of climate disruption, and using recycled paper reduces the pressure to log more trees,” said Rod Arakaki, audience development director at YES! Magazine. “Compared to National Geographic, Condé Nast, Time, and Hearst, Yes! is a small circulation publication, and we have a long history of using recycled paper in our magazine. If we can do it, so can they. We encourage them all to begin using recycled paper and to help motivate the rest of the magazine industry to follow.”

The report can be found here: www.greenamerica.org/pdf/NatGeo-LCA-Report-2013.pdf and the executive summary here: www.greenamerica.org/pdf/NatGeo-LCA-ExecSummary-2013.pdf.

Green America is the nation’s leading green economy organization. Founded in 1982, Green America (formerly Co-op America) provides the economic strategies, organizing power and practical tools for businesses, investors, and individuals to solve today’s social and environmental problems. www.GreenAmerica.org

Green America’s Better Paper Project empowers the magazine industry to go green. For over ten years, we've helped magazine publishers choose sustainable papers (recycled and certified) and give them a leg up in the green economy.

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