

Transcription John Pabon Part 1

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn, returned to us at last and the listeners are glad to have her back. Today we are welcoming, on a return visit to us, John Pabon. John spoke to us early last year, early in 2023, just before his next book was released. We're going to hear a little bit about that today but we're also going to follow up on some questions that came through after his last visit to us.

If you haven't met John before, let me introduce you to him. John Pabon has spent two decades in the business of saving our earth. After leaving his role in the United Nations, John travelled the world studying the impacts of sustainability firsthand in factories, on fields and in Fortune 500s. His mission is to move sustainability from theory to practical strategies that help people and businesses confidently make a real impact. Over his 20-year career, he had the privilege of working with the United Nations, McKinsey's, AC Nielsen, and as a consultant with B.S.R., the world's largest sustainability-focused business network. He's the founder of Fulcrum Strategic Advisors, program director for the conference boards, Asia Sustainability Leaders Council, and serves on the board of the advisors to the US Green Chamber of Commerce. John now is also the author of two books, the first one, "Sustainability for the Rest of Us, Your No-Bullshit Five-Point Plan For Saving the Planet", and "The Great Greenwashing", which has just recently come out and he's been around the world launching it. Welcome back, John.

It's like a fun little family reunion. Good to see you, both.

As I said, we had a number of questions that came in last time. The first of those was about a scenario that the particular listener has, that is talking about specialist needs. So this is for the listeners, if I just give you some background, this is about a special needs service provider for early childhood intervention and education. What the listener is talking about is that they use rice as a play element because if they use sand, which would be the normal thing that would be used, the children will eat the sand. They don't eat the rice, which is quite interesting itself, but the tactile sensation of the rice is better for them in a learning sense. What our listener is concerned about is that her staff and to some extent the organisation, the corporate organisation she works for, are concerned about the sustainability implications of them using rice for this play activity. Is there some way that they can research what else they can do, not in terms of what they can use, but in what they can do in a corporate sense to show responsibility in terms of sustainability? They have thought about it, they research, that there's, what she said was, is there some "offset" plan that they can use?

It's interesting, it's a really interesting predicament and I think overall it's important to remember, this applies to everybody, is you don't have to do everything, especially in the sort of a corporate sense. I think a lot of times people feel as if, as a corporation, you need to represent every single thing and sort of be like Greenpeace, but you know in a lot of ways there are particular elements within a corporation, regardless of if it's an education or in mining, particularly mining, that you won't be able to do particular things.

And I think certainly with this particular example, there may not be necessarily a need to try to offset that, especially if it's rice, because rice is a fairly abundant sort of item

It's not as if they're using a small plastic beads that are manufactured in a developing country by a child. So I think generally speaking, they could probably sleep quite well that they're not necessarily having a massive impact.

I think, even more interesting, is that they're thinking of this and they're saying, oh, this might be an issue. What can I do to prevent it? I think that is the most important part because that's showing that people are understanding what's going on, that every little piece of the puzzle within their corporations may have a positive or a negative impact.

So even just demonstrating that they've thought through the reason of why they're doing this and the potential implications for anybody, you know, sort of watching or their stakeholders, is enough sometimes just to not necessarily try to to hide anything. I always tell people, you know, your stakeholders don't need you to be perfect. They just don't want you to lie to them. So just showing a little bit of forethought into this and then also if there's a particular passion for another thing that the company is doing quite well, whether it's at a local or you said there's sort of a bigger organization, bringing that to the forefront and talking about that as well as a way to use the word offset. So you're using the word "offset" to show that they've thought through this and that they are doing things to make it a little bit better. But I think they can rest pretty easy with what they're doing.

I think the essence to the answer is that is they're not trying to do everything and they don't have to have all of the answers. But it's really, really rewarding to know that they are thinking about it and I think particularly in that space where it is and remember when we talk about sustainability, that's obviously a loaded term, "sustainability".

Usually people think the green side of things, which is important and it's the part that gets the most PR, but it's only one portion of everything we do. There's an entire social element and education, particularly around, you know, different sorts of populations that this person is working directly with, that's social good, obviously in my opinion, would outweigh any potential small impact from the environmental perspective that they could be having for using rice. So balance it out a little bit and look at the larger picture.

Just on that point, some of the feedback that I got from the listeners to your previous podcast was very much around the point that they were so glad they heard you because they always thought green and not beyond green. Now they felt they had more information and they were happy with that.

Absolutely. And it's really important because I think a lot of people, maybe we care about the environment, at least we say we care about the environment, but maybe that's not somebody's particular passion point. Maybe they care about people, educating the next generation or maybe they love animals. But they wouldn't necessarily attribute that to doing something "sustainable". But at the end of the day, it's really an umbrella term for anything that builds a better future for people or the planet. So anything anybody is doing, whether it's green or on the social side or even like I do, I work with corporations on on making sure they're held to account with all the stuff that they're doing and saying that they're doing, all of that contributes to moving the needle in the right direction. People should be very happy that they're doing anything at all.

Can I just follow up on the that term sustainability "offsets"? Is that something that you're hearing?

It's a bad term. It's a bad thing. It's just sort of really starting to to enter, I think, the public vernacular. We've been talking about it within the industry for decades. And for anybody who doesn't know what an offset is, it's basically a way to go in and paint with very broad strokes. Do a bad thing but pay somebody off to make it look like you're doing a good thing. So it doesn't necessarily solve a problem, even though on the surface it may seem to. We see it particularly today when you buy a flight, you know, you can have the privilege of paying Qantas three extra dollars to have them offset your flight, which actually doesn't offset it. What it does is, on paper they say they're going to plant a tree somewhere on your behalf but that doesn't environmentally offset a flight that you're on. It's sort of smoke and mirrors and I think corporations for decades have really relied on this as a way to show they're moving in the right direction. But, only recently, have people started to wake up and say no, it's essentially an excuse for bad behavior.

That ties in nicely with a number of other questions that we got about green washing particularly and green scamming. Are they two different things or interlinked?

Interlinked absolutely. So in "The Great Greenwashing" I tried to break down and make, like I do in all my writing or when I talk to people, I want to make this as simple as possible.

I'll just stop you there and say, when you say "in The Great Greenwashing", which is available....

Oh my publicist would love that you just did that. Thank you. In "The Great Green washing", which is available on all potential channels and in every bookstore known to man in Australia, actually it's been out for about a year in Australia to rave reviews and it just launched in North America in March, so just a few months ago, which has been it's been really, really good, I tried to break down and make things as simple as possible because anything in sustainability is so loaded in scientific jargon and, just honestly, it's not the sexiest topic in the world. So I try to make it as approachable as possible. So with green washing, any type of scams or lies that we're being we're being peddled, it can come in a few different forms. There's the marketing side what I call "greenspeak". So that's how companies talk about what they're doing. It's how they package things, they love to use green packages and pretty pictures to try to denote meaning which yeah maybe they're doing good things but you know the packaging isn't going to be the be all and end all of that. Then there's also the misdirection, that's another big part. Look over here not over there. Sometimes companies will inundate you with data or they will post a pretty picture of kids on the front of their sustainability report but don't look at the child labor we have in Mozambique, sort of stuff. And the third big one, which I didn't even know existed until I started to do the research, is green scamming. Greenscamming fits very nicely into the world of greenwashing but essentially greenscamming is when larger, particularly cashed up corporations, will actually fund lobbying groups, groups that on the surface look like they are NGOs. One of my favorites, and I don't recall the exact name, but it is a European media conglomerate. I think their name is something to the effect of "the European media center for climate integrity", so on the surface it looks as if, you know, they're promoting information about climate change and what we can do to be better but in fact it's funded by an oil company and their entire purpose is to pedal out misinformation on social media. It's literally being scammed by usually the worst of the worst, so we're talking the most unsustainable industries, oil, gas, mining, defence and

tobacco. Those are the four big bad ones. I should have named that chapter of the book, now that I think about it, "the four horsemen", that would have been a much better name. I just thought of that, it's named "the unsustainable" in the book but "four horsemen" would have been much better.

Reprint! Just in terms of that, are consumers aware, are they becoming more educated about being able to pick out when they're being scammed or when there's green washing happening? And the second part of that is, if they are, where do they go, where is the groundswell of that support?

Absolutely and they may, consumers, may not have the the vernacular around what's happening but I think from a gut instinct and certainly given, you know, particularly over the past year, how wary people are of taking claims at face value, whether that's with corporations or additions, today people are much more aware when they go to the store and they pick up something and their guts sort of says that doesn't seem right or or you know this is sort of fishy or I don't understand what this claim is. You know, this claim said that this product is two times more whatever but they didn't give me any context to what that means, so consumers are really starting to become quite wise to these things going on. Whether or not they're actually going to spend their hard earned money, especially in economic times like these, to make the right choice is a very different thing and one of the things that we come up against especially in market research around sustainability is when someone's given a survey and it says, you know, would you spend more money to buy an organic product or a good product? Nobody is going to say no to that on paper but in reality will they actually do it? We don't know. The numbers are sort of fudged because we see these, I think I saw one in Australia, where it said 90% of millennial consumers will pay more at the till for sustainable products, but we know, in practice, that's not the reality. We know just sort of anecdotally that people are much smarter with the stuff going on, they are trying to purchase from companies, were possible, that are better for the planet, better for people, type of companies. The complicating issue is that as that starts to happen, companies that are bad, they're always going to be bad, so they will find ways to invest more into their marketing function to try to make the greenwashing even slicker, to basically pull the wool over the eyes of people. It's going to take continuous, unfortunately I am going to say this and people are not going to like this, research every time you go to the store and I know that is a burden, I don't want to do research when I go to the store and I guarantee nobody else does either, but that's sort of the reality of today and I think we talked about this last time, if I had a crystal ball and I looked 10 or 15 years into the future, those companies today that aren't playing ball, that aren't doing the right thing, there's not going to be a space for them. So when a consumer of the future goes to the store and they they look at the shelf, all the choices will be the right choice at a price point because everything's at scale that is okay for their wallet. We're just in this transition period now where we have to do the research and yeah we have to pay a little bit more for the time being.

Are consumers looking more for data to back the claims up now?

I think they are. Certainly looking into maybe not the data points per se, unless it's a company that is quite far along on their sustainability journey that offers that, which there are some that do that, but really back checking. I think, at least for me, and I know some people that I would talk to when we're researching a company, at the store we would probably look at the news

about that company versus the company's website, right. The company's website, I mean that's marketing speak, so that is really no help but if you go to the news section on Google, you can see pretty quickly what comes up and if a company is good or bad, so you're sort of doing a quick check, you don't need to go into too much detail unless you have the time to do so, but I think consumers are looking for both qualitative and quantitative data points to try to make a decision.

Let's take a break there in our discussion with John Pabon. Join is for part two, for now I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.