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**Are Eco-labels an Effective Tool for Conservation?**Posted on [November 17, 2010](#) by [Chris Jensen](#)

On of the things that I like about the [Ecological Society of America](#)'s "accessible" journal [Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment](#) is that it always contains an eclectic mix of articles. The November 2010 issue contains an article entitled "[Strategic tradeoffs for wildlife-friendly eco-labels](#)" that you just would not see in most academic journals.

Authored by [Adrian Treves](#) and Stephanie Michelle Jones, this article discusses the potential benefits of different types of eco-labels designed to assure consumers that the products they buy are "ecologically friendly" to wildlife. Treves and Jones identify three types of labels, each with its own level of rigor and potential benefits. "Supportive" labels suggest that the product itself is not necessarily without harm to wildlife, assuring only that the company involved

donates some fraction of their profits to organizations that promote conservation. While this kind of label is the easiest to verify, it also may have the least conservation value. And if consumption is point of impact, the decoupling of the product from the cause is problematic. "Persuasive" labels go one step further, certifying that the producer has reduced the impact of production on wildlife. The "[Bird Friendly](#)" label for coffee is an example of a Persuasive label, and if properly certified allows the consumer to make choices that lower impact on at least some forms of wildlife. The final and most rigorous labels are "Protective", and require that the producer not only show reduced impact but actually protect habitat and maintain wildlife populations as a part of the production or harvesting process. While Protective labels may have the highest value in terms of sustainability, Treves and Jones point out that they are also the most difficult and expensive to verify, so they may only be used for very high-value products.

Treves and Jones' analysis suggests that eco-labels are at an early stage of development, and transparent verification of claims is needed for these labels to reach their potential for changing consumer choices. I agree, although I worry that like so many other "green products" the items that carry these labels will be over-consumed like everything else. When you really need something it is good to buy green, but it is always greener to buy nothing.

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#### About Chris Jensen

I hold a position as an Assistant Professor at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY, where I conduct research and teach courses in ecology and evolution.

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