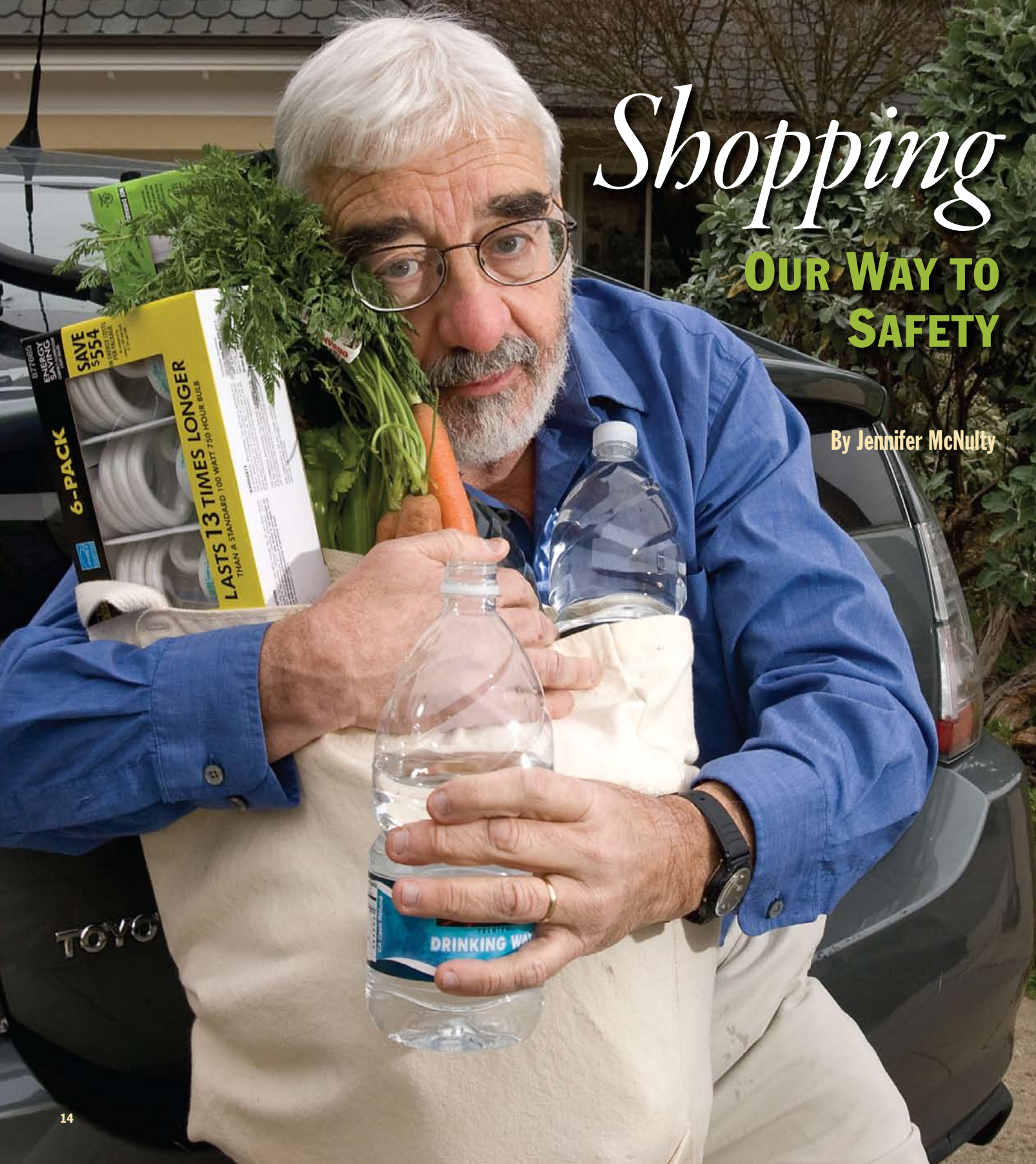


Is 'green' consumerism replacing environmental activism?

Shopping

OUR WAY TO SAFETY

By Jennifer McNulty



LIKE A MARKETER'S dream come true, Americans have responded to environmental degradation by shopping, as if buying bottled water and organic vegetables will protect them from pollution.

Indeed, consumers appear almost giddy as they reach for their wallets, paying roughly 1,000 times as much for bottled water as they would pay for the same amount of tap water—despite widespread reports that many leading brands are little more than treated municipal tap water.

And it's not just water and organic veggies that shoppers are snapping up: Judging by the popularity of "natural" personal hygiene products, "nontoxic" household cleaning products, and "green" building materials, a growing number of consumers believe they can buy some protection and some peace of mind.

But can they?

In his new book, *Shopping Our Way to Safety: How We Changed from Protecting the Environment to Protecting Ourselves*, UCSC sociology professor Andrew Szasz (pictured, left) says "buying green" offers little real defense against environmental hazards and may pose an even greater threat by lulling people into a false sense of security.

"It's a peculiar form of environmentalism in which people recognize the problem but have given up on any hope of collective improvement," contends Szasz. "Consumers believe these products will protect them, which creates a kind of political 'anesthesia' that severely reduces their willingness to participate in collective political action to generate real change."

Despite the booming business in products designed to protect consumers from environmental threats, Szasz finds little evidence that these products pro-

vide the benefits consumers are counting on. Bottled water is less stringently regulated than tap water, and although people who consistently eat organic foods do have lower levels of pesticide residues in their bodies, they are not residue-free. As for "natural" and "nontoxic" products, including clothing,

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bedding, and furniture, Szasz points out that such products are poorly regulated, if they are regulated at all. "These products do not work nearly well enough to warrant the faith consumers have placed in them," he says.

Today's individualistic, consumer-based approach to dealing with hazards is a perfect example of a phenomenon Szasz has dubbed "inverted quarantine." Unlike the public health model

of quarantine, in which contagions are contained to protect the public, Szasz's model refers to people attempting to insulate themselves from omnipresent threats. In his book, Szasz presents the fallout shelter panic of 1961 as a compelling example of inverted quarantine. That autumn, in the wake of an alarm-

ing speech by President Kennedy, Americans briefly embraced the notion that they could survive a nuclear attack by fleeing to a backyard shelter. *Life* magazine even published a feature about post-attack shelter living, complete with drawings of a smiling mom, pipe-smoking dad, and happy kids enjoying life underground. Exploiting the public's very real fears of nuclear war, building contractors and con artists capitalized on the frenzy until reason finally prevailed—and tensions with Russia eased.

The episode reveals the ultimate limits of individual self-protection, says Szasz.

"Instead of trying to limit contaminants in our environment, the way public health officials do when there's an outbreak of disease, people have given up on the collective good," he says. "They're hiding behind an array of products they hope will protect them. It's a fatalistic, consumer-based approach that is, like the fallout shelters, bound to fail."

But environmental threats are real and likely to intensify, warns Szasz, who nevertheless remains hopeful that public awareness will rouse people from their complacency and rekindle a more vibrant, collective environmental movement.

"Surveys show that Americans care about the environment, water pollution, and air quality, but there's a disconnect," he says. "Instead of engaging in political action, people go shopping and think they've solved the problem. That needs to change."