



# The Godfather of Greening

**On a Monday afternoon** in March, Allen Hershkowitz is in his office in New York on a conference call with Chicago. In three weeks, officials from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) will pay a visit to the Windy City, a contender for the 2016 summer games. The IOC wants an environmentally conscious Olympics, which is why the Chicagoans are conferring with the New Yorker. Hershkowitz is the godfather of large-scale greening.

“How many people are coming in?” he wants to know. “We want to offset their transportation. When they are shepherded around Chicago, we want zero-emissions vehicles or hybrids. We do not want SUVs.” Put recycling bins in their hotel rooms, he advises. Serve them organic food. No plastic water bottles! Ask Michael Jordan to make a speech about Chicago’s commitment to the environment. Ask Oprah. “And you’re going to get the toilet paper changed in all the hotels, right?”

“How do we do that?”

“You want postconsumer recycled toilet paper. We should not be turning forests into toilet paper,” says Hershkowitz, who two weeks earlier was quoted in the British newspaper *The Guardian* as saying: “Future generations are going to look at the way we make toilet paper as one of the greatest excesses of our age.”

Hershkowitz asks about composting food waste. Illinois doesn’t have the infrastructure, the Chicagoans bemoan.

“We’re talking about 2016,” he reassures them. “That’s definitely enough time to set up infrastructure for composting in Chicago.” >>



NRDC’s Allen Hershkowitz (top left) is making sure the lights on Broadway—including this sign for the musical *Hair*—are energy efficient.

environmental toll, they turn to a Gandhi-inspired pragmatist. **By Anna Dubrovsky**





**RED SOX GO GREEN** Solar panels at Fenway Park; Hershkowitz (second to left) and other “enviros” pose with Red Sox mascot and CEO (far right), Earth Day 2008.

Hershkowitz is a man on a mission but also a pragmatist. He is a senior scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), a brigade of tree huggers with PhDs and JDs. He has been at this for 30 years—bearing witness to ecological destruction and doing his damndest to reverse it. He knows that changes to individual lifestyle, corporate practices, and government policy don’t happen overnight. A photo of Mahatma Gandhi sitting in the shade of a tree hangs from his old

Olympic fans. “These are fishbowl events,” he says. “The whole world is watching.”

In 2004, the NRDC board gathered at the Utah home of actor Robert Redford, a longtime trustee. “We were having a discussion about fighting the Bush administration’s distortion of science—trying to claim that global warming science was just speculation and theory,” Hershkowitz recalls. “Redford said: ‘We need to reach out to nontraditional

## THE NRDC HELPS TRANSFORM BALLPARKS FROM HUBS OF CONSUMPTION TO MODELS OF SUSTAINABILITY.

wooden desk. “This takes time,” he says in a rare space between meetings. “We did not get into the ecological situation we’re in overnight. We have arrived at this ecological crisis as a result of billions of decisions being made by billions of people and millions of corporations over 150 years during the industrial age. And we’re going to get out of the problem by billions of people making ecologically intelligent decisions.”

Before he hangs up, he reminds the Chicago committee that its decisions can affect the decisions of countless

allies, like people in sports. We need to go to baseball stadiums and basketball arenas and football games.”

Hershkowitz had dipped a toe in that world. The previous year, the owners of the Philadelphia Eagles had sought his counsel after learning that the toilet paper they purchased for the stadium originated in eagle habitat. “As soon as they found out about it, they changed it,” he says. “You can imagine the brand liability of finding out the Eagles are hurting eagle habitat to make toilet paper.” Today, the football

team purchases wind energy to power its stadium and training facility and reimburses employees who sign up for wind power.

Hershkowitz told Redford about his work with the Eagles. They brainstormed ways to corral other teams into the environmental movement, and the Academy Award winner agreed to make a video about the environmental impacts of baseball stadiums. Hershkowitz wrangled a meeting with Major League Baseball (MLB) Commissioner Bud Selig, who was so impressed that he sent the video to team owners.

Hershkowitz had fought in many and various arenas in his career as a conservationist. He’d testified before Congress and in courtrooms across the country. He’d worked alongside non-governmental organizations in Belize to halt a proposed hazardous waste and garbage landfill near the Sibun River. He’d coordinated campaigns to halt destructive logging and mining practices in the southeastern United States and led a failed but celebrated attempt to build a recycled-paper mill in the Bronx. But the MLB alliance marked a watershed in the history of environmentalism.

“Historically, the environmental movement never really reached out to sports that much,” says Hershkowitz. “Entertainers had intermittently been involved in our cause, but for the most part, we had ignored the fact that hundreds of millions of people watch sports every week and millions go to sporting events every year. People all over the world love sports, and we’d never

*Contributing editor Anna Dubrovsky writes and teaches yoga in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and buys recycled toilet paper.*

aligned ourselves with sports strategically to advance our cause.”

Under Hershkowitz’s direction, the NRDC created location-specific greening guides for each MLB team—game plans for transforming ballparks from hubs of consumption to models of sustainability. The guides help owners and managers make environmentally sensitive decisions about everything from laundry detergent to lighting, and highlight the practices of teams leading the greening charge. The Washington Nationals play in the first major U.S. stadium to receive LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. At Progressive Field in Cleveland, fans sip beer from compostable cups made from corn. A solar pavilion erected in 2007 produces enough energy to power the stadium’s 400 televisions. In a public service announcement shown on the scoreboard, Indians switch-hitter Victor Martinez hits a ball that turns into a plastic bottle. The bottle lands in a recycling bin.

“The environmental movement has been criticized for being a movement of elites for people who can afford to buy organic or can afford to buy solar energy for their house—but not for the

majority of people in America,” says former Gap Inc. chairman Robert J. Fisher, an NRDC trustee and partial owner of the Oakland Athletics. “What Allen’s doing is bringing environmentalism to everybody. He’s making it tangible for everybody. It’s not intimidating. We can all live it.”

The National Hockey League, National Basketball Association, and United States Tennis Association have all come to rely on Hershkowitz’s counsel. At last year’s wind-powered US Open, luxury carmaker Lexus showcased hybrid vehicles. For the first time, tennis ball cans were recycled. The NRDC is now in talks with sponsor Wilson Sporting Goods Company to make ball cans with a single material and a higher recycled content.

The nonprofit NRDC isn’t paid for its work with organizations and businesses and doesn’t accept corporate contributions. “That’s why they trust us,” says Hershkowitz, who joined the advocacy group 20 years ago. “They are bombarded by vendors who claim to sell ecologically meaningful products. They know if they are aligned with the NRDC, they are aligned with the most environmentally rigorous organization

■ Watch Allen Hershkowitz green the ballpark, and get more NRDC tips, at [yogaplus.org/nrdc](http://yogaplus.org/nrdc).

on the planet. We protect them from making mistakes ecologically.”

In return, the NRDC gets a bullhorn for its environmental agenda. “These are large culture-shaping organizations,” he says. When Victor Martinez or tennis great Billie Jean King talk about recycling, people listen. When high-profile organizations demand organic foods, recycled paper, nontoxic cleaning products, solar arrays, waterless urinals, and other earth-friendly products at competitive prices, manufacturers respond.

This year, the Academy Awards demanded a “green” red carpet. Its existing vendor stepped up, supplying a carpet made of recycled plastic. “For the most part, people buy products based on price and performance and fashion,” says Hershkowitz, who coordinates greening of the Grammy Awards as well as the Oscars. “I would not bet the future of our generations on the prospect that billions of consumers are going to prioritize environmental criteria when they go (continues on page 72)

## Green Your Paper Products

Although toilet paper is a product that we use for less than three seconds, old-growth forests, tropical and sub-tropical forests, boreal forests, and many others are being decimated by its manufacturers. “Deforestation causes more global warming pollution than all the combined emissions of cars, trucks, buses, airplanes, and ships in the entire world,” writes Hershkowitz in his blog. The NRDC and Greenpeace are campaigning globally to phase out virgin-fiber toilet paper “the same way we’re phasing out the use of incandescent light bulbs,” he says. You can help stop this destruction, too, by making smart shopping decisions about all of your disposable paper products. Try these tips from the NRDC:

**Buy paper products with recycled content—especially postconsumer fibers.** Postconsumer fibers are recovered from paper that was previously used by consumers and would otherwise have been dumped into a landfill or an incinerator.

**Buy paper products made with clean, safe processes.** Paper products are bleached to make them whiter and brighter, but chlorine used in many bleaching processes contributes to the formation of harmful chemicals that wind up in our air and water, and are highly toxic to people and fish. Look for products labeled totally chlorine-free (TCF) or processed chlorine-free (PCF).

**Tell tissue manufacturers to stop using virgin wood for throwaway products.** If a brand you buy doesn’t have recycled content, tell the company to use more recycled fibers to avoid sourcing from ecologically valuable forests such as those in the Cumberland Plateau and Canadian boreal, and to ensure any virgin fibers used are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council.

**Fact:** If every household in the U.S. replaced just one roll of virgin fiber toilet paper (500 sheets) with a 100% recycled roll, we could save 423,900 trees. Visit [nrdc.org/paper](http://nrdc.org/paper) to learn more.

# The Godfather of Greening

(continued from page 39)

to the supermarket or the auto dealer or a store to buy clothes. So we really need to get manufacturers to change the way they do business and provide us with environmentally better products, whether we know we're buying them or not. We have to green the infrastructure."

Part of what makes Hershkowitz so persuasive is his facility with facts and figures. He has the recall of a *Jeopardy* champion, peppering conversations with stats both grim and inspiring: "The number of environmental refugees—people forced from their homes by droughts, flooding, and other disasters—is expected to increase from 155 million to a billion by 2050. In the tropics alone, we're razing 38 million acres of forest a year, more than an acre a second. More than 4 percent of gross domestic product globally supports environmentally perverse activities such as deforestation and landfilling. The Los Angeles Staples Center is saving 7 million gallons of water a year and more than \$2,300 a month because it switched to waterless urinals."

His effectiveness also owes much to his likeability. Hershkowitz doesn't antagonize. He nudges. He celebrates baby steps. "Angry people can't make a peaceful world," he says. A "Mean People Suck" sticker decorates his office at the NRDC, where lights dim if occupants sit still for too long.

The day after his conference call with Chicago, Hershkowitz is holding court at the midtown Manhattan headquarters of The Broadway League, the trade association for theater owners, producers, and suppliers. He is shadowed by a high school senior weighing a future in environmental advocacy. The Broadway Goes Green steering committee has good news and bad news. Twenty-five of the 39 theaters have replaced incandescent bulbs in their marquees with more efficient lighting. But

*Playbill*, the magazine distributed to 44 million theatergoers annually, is still printed on virgin paper.

Hershkowitz is unfazed. "It took us three years to change the carpet at the Oscars," he tells frustrated committee members.

Broadway came knocking on his door last summer, inviting him to speak about greening to an industry crowd. "He got everybody totally jazzed up about what was possible," recalls Susan Sampliner, company manager for *Wicked*. In November, Hershkowitz shared the stage at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre with Broadway personalities and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg for the announcement of an industry-wide greening initiative.

When eight shows closed in January, technical directors arranged for the recycling or reuse of more than 90 percent of the scenery. "Traditionally, when a show closes, the sets just get thrown out," explains Sampliner, who co-chairs the steering committee. "You have a \$14 million production literally thrown into dumpsters, which is a ridiculous waste." Lighting designers are in talks with lighting manufacturers about developing theater-quality compact fluorescent lights. Sound technicians are switching to rechargeable batteries. Some touring companies are purchasing carbon offsets.

"It's been interesting," says Sampliner. "This is the first time I've seen Broadway come together like this since the AIDS epidemic. There hasn't been a common cause like that until now."

The public's growing enthusiasm for all things green has transformed the tousle-haired Hershkowitz from agitator to insider. Once upon a time, he and other "enviros" were grossly outnumbered by industry lobbyists at government hearings. Now, a day after meeting with The Broadway League, Hershkowitz travels to Washington at the invitation of Obama administration officials, who want to pick his brain about greening initiatives. He sits on the

boards of corporations. He is invited to throw the first pitch at professional baseball games.

But Hershkowitz, 54, isn't slowing down. The earth—his "nest," he calls it—is still in peril. There are fewer forests than when he started this work. There are fewer species. Northern Alaska is saturated with oil and gas leases. In Manchuria, tiger habitat is still being destroyed to make cigarette paper. "I've seen this with my own eyes," he says. "I have been up in northern Canada, watching ancient forest that existed before Mohammed, before Moses, before Christ, getting cut down to make toilet paper." Hershkowitz recently returned from Brazil, where portions of the most biologically diverse savannah on earth are being converted to sugar plantations for the production of biofuel—a misstep in the rush to replace fossil fuels, he says. "There are times of despair, but I try not to despair. 'Don't despair. But if you must despair, work on.' That's from the Book of Job. That's been my mantra for the last 30 years."

Hershkowitz, who was born in Brooklyn to survivors of Nazi concentration camps, has been practicing yoga since he was 18. "Like everybody, I struggle with my relationship with the Divine. How do I connect with the Divine? I connect through my work and my duty to my kids," says the father of three. "A lot of folks who profess to be religious do some terrible things, and they think they can atone by going to a confessional once in a while. We have to do right work. Our work has to be mindful."

And what if he falls short? What if it's too late? Hershkowitz has a yogic perspective on that, too. "We have to be judged by our intentions because the results of our efforts are affected by so many things beyond our control. When I get before my maker, He's not going to say, 'Did you save the rain forest? Did you save the atmosphere?' He's going to say, 'What did you *try* to do?'" ■