

The Simpsons' Beloved Springfield

*Essays on the TV Series
and Town That Are Part of Us All*

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Is Yellow the New Green?*

The Banal Environmentalism of The Simpsons

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The Couch Gag (aka, the Introduction)

As the clouds part, revealing *The Simpsons* nameplate in the sky of the show's second-ever full episode,¹ and the now-iconic Danny Elfman-composed theme music begins, the nuclear power plant, towering over Springfield, is the first structure to come into view. Its sign is disarmingly friendly: "Welcome to Springfield Nuclear Power Plant." It gives way to a mountain of abandoned tires—engulfed in flames in later episodes—and finally to Bartholomew (Bart) JoJo Simpson's classroom and his very first chalkboard gag, writing over and over again, "I will not waste chalk." Cut to his father, Homer Jay Simpson, mishandling a uranium rod at the power plant and soon thereafter discarding it onto the street ("Bart the Genius" 1.2) on his way to his house on Evergreen Terrace, a street ostensibly named for the trees that were displaced by single-family-home development.

In the next episode, viewers see through a class field trip more of the industrial wasteland that is Springfield. Bart's school bus drives by the town's toxic-waste dump, where frothing liquids spew openly from pipes to pools like a water park, the town tire yard, the prison, and finally the object of the field trip, an inside look at the nuclear power plant, where students march past a guard drinking soda and watching Krusty the Clown on television. Waylon Smithers, Jr., presents Bart's class the animated educational film, "Nuclear Energy: Our Misunderstood Friend," complete with Smiling Joe

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Fission, talking rods of uranium 235, and grouchy nuclear waste that Smiling Joe literally sweeps under the carpet, “where no one will find it for a million years.” After the film, the students tour the plant and see where the plant’s radioactive water rejoins nature—the frolicking grounds of Blinky, the three-eyed orange fish (“Homer’s Odyssey” 1.3) (and precursor to four-eyed fish [“Brawl in the Family” 13.7], six-eyed fish [“Lisa’s Wedding” 6.19], and a half-dozen other three-eyed mutated animals, including three-eyed lobster [“Homer’s Paternity Coot” 17.10], and, most commonly, the three-eyed crow seen in the title scene of later episodes).

The dangers of nuclear energy, wasteful consumption, pollution—from the very beginning of *The Simpsons*, the show has had plenty to say about the environment and our often-destructive role in it. But to what extent is yellow (the hue of most characters in *The Simpsons*) the new green? And if so, does it matter?

The impact of the environmental nature of *The Simpsons* may best be described as the effect of a non-economic form of nudge theory—a way that small inputs can influence individual decision making.² In this case, everyone exposed to environmental episodes of *The Simpsons* may not be making more environmentally minded decisions, but the exposure may help push them toward doing so. *The Simpsons* then becomes one of many factors that nudge us toward (or against) environmentally friendly decisions. Think of it as incremental attitude change—or a cultural nudge.

The inclusion of environmental themes in television episodes is an example of what I consider “banal environmentalism”³—the use of environmental representations in everyday humdrum life to help shape the public’s environmental ethos. The term is derived from “banal nationalism,” as coined by Michael Billig, who found nationalism in everyday acts such as using coins emblazoned with “In God We Trust” and using U.S. flag–imprinted postage stamps. To Billig, the unconscious ingestion of patriotism by citizens was partly how the state invented and reinvented itself daily. Banal environmentalism, therefore, describes how seemingly innocuous activities, such as watching television, unconsciously inform our understanding of the environment.⁴ In so doing, banal environmentalism helps normalize environmentally oriented social values and actions.⁵

As the longest-running sitcom in American-television history—and arguably one of the most well-known hallmarks of modern American culture—*The Simpsons* may be among the most influential television shows ever. And its tenure has featured many environmentally oriented episodes that are excellent examples of banal environmentalism. For the past three decades, millions of people have tuned in to watch *The Simpsons* weekly, and many millions more have watched the show through DVDs, network syndication, and online streaming. And *The Simpsons* has generated an estimated \$13 bil-

lion in revenue for its owners, 20th Century–Fox⁶ (Klara; Statistic Brain Research Institute)—not just through its 600-plus episodes and its feature film and its rides at Universal Studios in California and Florida but through its 10,000-branded products sold around the world (Klara). But no one has previously analyzed the content of all the episodes of *The Simpsons*, nor has anyone compared that to the content of all the episodes of *The Simpsons'* peers.

To discover just how green *The Simpsons* series is, I conducted a qualitative-content analysis of 76 television shows, consisting of nearly 14,000 television episodes—perhaps the largest such content analysis ever undertaken on television.⁷ In comparison to its peers, *The Simpsons* stands out as among the most environmentally minded sitcoms on television—and it has covered environmental issues in decade after decade of production.

The Springfield Shopper (aka, the Literature Review)

The environmental aspects of *The Simpsons* have not gone unnoticed,⁸ but they largely have been unstudied. Those researchers who have examined *The Simpsons* from an environmental perspective mainly have focused on *The Simpsons Movie* (Chagan; Küchler, 229–240; Murray and Heumann 229–240; Pike 57–75; Seymour, 207–209; Starosielski) and the show's criticism of nuclear energy⁹ (Broderick 244–272). However, four studies have been conducted that are similar to this one—although this one, as described in both the introduction as well as the next section, is more extensive.

In 2002, Anne Marie Todd analyzed the environmental content of 80 percent of the episodes in the first ten seasons of *The Simpsons*. She finds that *The Simpsons* focused on three environmental issues above others: nuclear energy, animal welfare, and society's relationship with nature. "*The Simpsons* functions as a form of environmental activism and thus reveals popular culture's effectiveness as a medium for ecological commentary," Todd concludes. "The show increases public awareness of environmental issues, and educates the audience while entertaining them" (Todd 78).

In 2005, Andrew Wood and Todd documented how geographic place and transportation are ongoing themes throughout *The Simpsons*. Springfield, they wrote, is an "omnitopia," a town representing everywhere but actually existing nowhere—while simultaneously tied to its own local environment, albeit often negatively (Todd and Wood).

"The commodification of place throughout *The Simpsons* illustrates the effects of capitalism on the cultural geography of Springfield," they wrote. "Icons of progress such as the recycling plant are unmasked as slurry factories that empty the fields, forests, and oceans of nutrients, transforming the earth's

resources into an omnitarian sludge that melds the different colors of biodiversity and rich textures of ecological tapestries. As Anytown, USA, Springfield illustrates how contemporary cities perceive a zero-sum relationship between environmental sustainability and unfettered economic growth” (Todd and Wood).

Tim Delaney dedicated a chapter of his 2008 book on *The Simpsons* to the environmental nightmares—what he calls *enviromares*—portrayed in the show: air pollution (including global warming) and nuclear pollution (or the potential danger of it). Delaney also finds that episodes of *The Simpsons* included potential solutions, such as electric vehicles (“Beyond Blunderdome” 11.1), recycling (“The Old Man and the Lisa” 8.21), forest conservation (“Lisa the Tree Hugger” 21.4), and climate intervention/geoengineering in the stratosphere (Delaney 218–244, “Bart’s Comet” 6:14).

The third similar study was conducted in 2011 by the journalist Sara Peach, who downloaded transcripts for *The Simpsons*’ first thirteen seasons and the summaries for seasons thereafter and searched them for the terms “climate change,” “global warming,” and “greenhouse effect.”¹⁰ Peach finds that one of Bart’s two sisters, precocious eight-year-old Lisa Marie Simpson, is often the voice of environmental reason, particularly on climate change. “In their indifference to Lisa’s warnings,” Peach writes, “Springfield residents mirror the attitudes of many Americans.”¹¹ In the 475 episodes that she examined, Peach finds that climate change, global warming, and/or the greenhouse effect were mentioned in fewer than ten—and that “references to the issue are brief, often consisting of scenes of only a few seconds” (Peach).

Like Peach, I also have found that *The Simpsons* primarily has not taken on climate change as an issue—and even when it has, the take has been somewhat ambivalent,¹² perhaps reflecting Americans’ views on how best to act on climate change. But Peach’s study was lacking context. Although *The Simpsons* may have directly addressed climate change sparingly, climate change is but one of many environmental issues, and I have found that *The Simpsons* addressed climate change^{13,14} as well as other environmental issues at far greater rates than its peers.

As I was writing a revision of this chapter, David Feltmate published an article in which he charged that the humor of *The Simpsons* “critically engaged and undermined ecological issues,” that the show did not properly express the urgency of environmental issues or provide their solutions, and that previous studies “oversold the ecological awareness” of *The Simpsons* (Feltmate). But Feltmate’s study was very limited: He only examined *The Simpsons Movie* and two television episodes of *The Simpsons*. In his analysis, Feltmate argued that the viewers’ takeaway comes from the perspective of Charles Montgomery Burns, the curmudgeonly laissez-faire capitalist and owner of the nuclear power plant. However, I think that Mr. Burns represents the show’s example of how not to behave, and that the episodes’ takeaways are instead best expressed by Lisa’s pro-environmental morality.

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Feltmate also criticized *The Simpsons* as a cog in the capitalist, consumerist machine responsible for so much of the world's environmental degradation and destruction (Feltmate). However Feltmate failed to recognize that even if the show's status as a profit-making venture makes it part of the problem, it does not preclude the show from also being part of the solution. Given the scope of environmental issues, so much—perhaps everything—is to varying degrees both part of the problem and part of the solution. In my research, I have sought to quantify to what degree *The Simpsons*, particularly in relation to its peer sitcoms, may be part of the solution. *The Simpsons* can be capitalist and green, and because we live in a capitalist society, success combatting a range of wicked environmental problems such as climate change likely requires the imbuing of environmental values into capitalism.

Lastly, Feltmate, essentially echoed Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message"¹⁵ (McLuhan, 23-35), claiming that *The Simpsons* cannot be pro-environmental because of the sheer volume of carbon emissions, toxic chemicals, and unfair labor practices embedded in the televisions, phones, tablets and computers used to deliver the show to viewers. "Ecological awareness," Feltmate wrote about ecologically minded media writ large, "is brought to us by the very tools of ecological devastation" (Feltmate). While I think it is important to recognize and work to reduce the environmental and social ills that arise as a result of the production and consumption of some of society's favorite technologies—and I have written about the merits of restraints on capitalism and consumption, like Feltmate, through the lens of religion (Krantz)—the perfect is the enemy of good (to use the common paraphrase of the Italian proverb misattributed to Voltaire, "the best is the enemy of the good" [Ratcliffe, 389]). In other words, *The Simpsons* and its medium are not perfect (gasp!) but perfection may not be achievable, and as such one should not dismiss the show for its lack of perfection. I think that it is important to evaluate it not just as a producer of but also as a product of our culture, shaped by our society's inescapable consumptionist milieu. And today even the most utopian of environmental movements and the most ardent of environmental figures, save the few true hermits, are ensconced in our shared capitalist resource-intensive society. The key to modern environmentalism then becomes finding how we can best care for our shared Earth and its inhabitants within the restraints of our system while we hammer at those restraints, stretching their walls and helping to shift societal norms in the process. Each one of these boundary-stretching attempts, depending in part upon their degree of overtness, may be good examples of banal environmentalism at work. Among sitcoms on television—in what may be our most popular cultural producer and product—my research finds that *The Simpsons* is among the best at promoting environmental values.

Prof. Frink and Chocolate Microscopes (aka, the Methodology)

The environmental mindedness of *The Simpsons* was evident to me after watching it for years. But I sought to determine exactly how green *The Simpsons* is and how that compares to its television peers. First, I developed a list of *The Simpsons*' peers by reviewing the shows aired by 116 American television networks¹⁶ and selecting for shows that met the following criteria:

- First-run broadcast for seven or more seasons with one or more of those seasons overlapping with at least one of *The Simpsons*' first twenty-seven seasons,¹⁷ through July 2016;
- Aired in English;
- And an American-produced scripted sitcom.

Boundaries were necessary to make the study feasible. To not compare *The Simpsons* with other types of television shows—such as dramas, documentaries, talk shows, or the news—I only compared *The Simpsons* to other sitcoms. I chose shows that were contemporaneous to *The Simpsons* by selecting for those that aired at the same time, but not necessarily the same timeslot, as *The Simpsons*. However, I included all of a peer show's episodes even if some (or many) preceded *The Simpsons*' first airdate. I focused on first-run shows and ignored syndication to keep the peer group from *The Simpsons*' era. While no American sitcom has lasted as long as *The Simpsons*, I filtered for series that aired for at least seven seasons to compare long-running sitcoms to each other. Lastly, all of the shows needed to be American-produced English-language scripted sitcoms to properly compare shows that emerged from the same culture. So NBC's *The Office* qualified while BBC's *The Office* did not (both because it was not American and because it only aired for two seasons). Shows that were hybrids—such as sitcom dramas (*dramedies*) like *Nurse Jackie* and *Weeds*—were counted as sitcoms for purposes of this study. Shows such as *Bob's Burgers* whose seventh seasons occurred after July 2016 were excluded, as were all episodes of all shows airing after July 2016.

Including *The Simpsons*, I found 76 shows^{18,19} that met the above criteria. Combined, those shows account for 13,960 episodes,²⁰ with 596, or about 4.3 percent, of those represented by *The Simpsons*.

The next step was the content analysis. I eschewed throw-away one liners and other offhand references to the environment (which may skew a strict manifest-content analysis) and instead focused on determining whether or not an environmental issue was a major theme of an episode, filtering by the following environmental subcategories, which were developed through the analysis:

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- Agriculture, eco-minded food and vegetarianism/veganism^{21,22};
- Animal welfare;
- Camping, hiking, and wilderness;
- Energy;
- Generic environmentalism and climate change;
- Pollution;
- Transportation;
- And waste (including recycling and composting).

Each episode was coded as to whether or not it was environmentally themed, and if it was environmentally themed then whether the episode's orientation cast the environment in a positive or negative light. And each episode was coded into only one subcategory, so an episode that addressed more than one subcategory was coded as the subcategory that served as a slightly larger theme than the other(s).²³

To compare among major themes of episodes, I analyzed their content by reading publicly available episode summaries (such as those found on IMDb, Simpsons Wiki, *TV Guide*, and Wikipedia). (This could be called “distilled-content analysis,” since the content analysis was largely of summaries consisting of episodes' major themes distilled into one or more paragraphs.) When summaries were not available, and/or unclear as to whether or not an environmental issue constituted a major theme of the episode, and/or the orientation of the theme as positive or negative, I read episode scripts. And when scripts were not available, I watched the episodes themselves.

For purposes of this study, I only examined television shows²⁴ and not related films, although it is worth noting that the environmental theme of *The Simpsons Movie*—in which Springfield is nearly destroyed as a result of water pollution (Silverman)—is indicative of the overall eco-consciousness of *The Simpsons* as a television show.²⁵

Everything's Coming Up Milhouse! (aka, the Findings)

The results varied among three groups: whether the show dealt with the environment at all, in a positive light, or in a negative light. In this section, I mainly will discuss percentages in the first two groups and only sparsely results from the third. Among its peers and in the timeframe studied as defined above, *The Simpsons* is the third-most pro-environmental sitcom on American television, with 13 percent of its shows portraying environmental issues in a favorable light. *Futurama* ranks first at 16 percent, and *Parks and Recreation* ranks second at 15 percent.²⁶

It is unclear why *Futurama* is more pro-environmental than *The Simpsons*. One might suspect that the writers of *Futurama* are more pro-environmental than those of *The Simpsons*.²⁷ But many of the shows' writers have worked for both shows, and both shows even share the same creator, Matt Groening.²⁸ The difference then may be each show's time setting, with *The Simpsons* set in the present and *Futurama* set in the future (naturally). There may be something about setting shows in the future that makes them more amenable to environmental commentary.^{29,30} But I digress, as that is a topic for future research.

Parks and Recreation, though, has a notable advantage over *The Simpsons*: its overarching theme is about parks.³¹ Indeed, 84 percent of *Parks and Recreation*'s pro-environmental episodes featured building and/or protecting parks.

After *The Simpsons*, there is a dramatic drop off in pro-environmental episodes: *Adventure Time* places fourth at 5 percent; two shows tie at 4 percent; four shows tie at 3 percent; seven shows tie at 2 percent; 14 shows tie at 1 percent; and 45 shows tie at 0 percent.³² *Futurama*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *The Simpsons* certainly stand out as consistently addressing environmental issues in a positive light.

Other shows that one might expect to feature pro-environmental themes actually do not. For example, Vermont-set *Newhart* as well as San Francisco-set sitcoms *Full House* and *Monk* do not have a single episode where a major theme portrayed the environment positively.³³ One of the main characters in *How I Met Your Mother* dreams of being an environmental attorney, and yet only two of its 208 episodes—or about 1 percent—address the environment in a favorable light as one of its themes. And *The Big Bang Theory*—a show that is about the life of scientists—does not include a single episode that features the environment as a theme.

To better understand just how pro-environmental *The Simpsons* is compared to its peers, consider the following: of the 596 episodes of *The Simpsons* included in this study, 77, or 13 percent, include a pro-environmental theme. Of the 13,364 episodes of the 75 other peer sitcoms included in this study, only 152, or about 1 percent, include a pro-environmental theme. Less than half of all the shows contain at least a single episode with an environmental theme in a positive light.

Of course, every time that *The Simpsons* includes an environmental theme is not always in a pro-environmental light. For example, as fun to watch as the Conan O'Brien-scribed episode "Marge vs. the Monorail" is—particularly with its Phil Hartman-voiced "The Monorail Song" inspired by *The Music Man* and also in the tradition of the 1880 Italian song, "Funiculi, Funiculà," by Luigi Denza and Peppino Turco, celebrating the first funicular cable car on Mount Vesuvius—the portrayal of public transit as dangerous and investment in it as foolhardy³⁴ ("Marge vs. the Monorail" 4.12) makes the episode among the 23 episodes of *The Simpsons* that feature an environmental issue in a negative light.

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Overall, regardless of how the environment is portrayed (including both pro- and anti-environmental episodes), *The Simpsons* features an environmental theme 17 percent of the time, the third most of any show in the study. *Parks and Recreation* and *Futurama* (both at 18 percent) tie for first. At 16 percent, *Weeds* is in fourth place. (Many episodes of *Weeds* feature gardening, but engagement in the activity in the show often leads to negative, and sometimes deadly, outcomes.) *Adventure Time* (13 percent) finishes fifth, followed by *The Mentalist*, *SpongeBob SquarePants* (7 percent), *Family Guy*, and *Regular Show* (6 percent). Twenty-three shows are tied at between 2 and 5 percent, another twenty shows are tied at 1 percent, and two are tied at 0 percent—with 22³⁵ of those shows without a single episode that includes the environment as a theme at all. Essentially 30 percent of the total shows exclude the environment as a theme. As a basis of comparison, 33 percent of all the shows contain at least one episode with Atlantic City, N.J., as a theme and 14 percent of all the shows contain at least one episode with actor Adam West. With the exception of a few shows such as *The Simpsons*, environmental issues have been largely absent from long-running American sitcoms.

Because of its sheer number of seasons and episodes, *The Simpsons* leads all shows studied in numbers of pro-environmental episodes (77), anti-environmental episodes (23), and overall environmentally themed episodes (100).

While it is common for people to consider *The Simpsons* to be past its golden age,³⁶ the show's 77 pro-environmental episodes are evenly distributed over the 27 years examined in this study. (Twenty-eight of the pro-environmental episodes are found in the show's first nine years; 25 in Seasons 10 through 18; and 24 in Seasons 19 through 27.)

There also is an even distribution in authorship. The 77 pro-environmental episodes were written by 45 different people, all of whom wrote no more than five pro-environmental episodes, with the exception of one writer: the prolific John Swartzwelder, who wrote fourteen of the pro-environmental episodes on his own and co-wrote one with Sam Simon. Little is known about the famously reclusive Swartzwelder, who in his fifteen seasons at *The Simpsons* penned 59 episodes, more than any other writer (Donovan), but he has been described by his coworker, the director Mark Kirkland, as, ironically, a "self-declared anti-environmentalist" (Groening, et al.). And longtime *Simpsons'* writer David S. Cohen (future pen name David X. Cohen) said that he heard Swartzwelder make disparaging (and patently false) remarks about the environment, such as saying that there is more rainforest today than there had been one hundred years prior (Groening, et al.).

Despite having potentially anti-environmental views, Swartzwelder wrote some of *The Simpsons'* most iconic pro-environmental episodes, including "The Old Man and the Lisa" (8.21) (in which Mr. Burns and Lisa team up in the recycling business), "Bart Gets an Elephant" (5.17) (in which Homer

relents on giving away Bart's pet elephant named Stampy to an ivory dealer), and, with Sam Simon, "Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish" (2.4) (in which Blinky the three-eyed fish plays a role in both spurring and then spoiling Mr. Burns' gubernatorial bid).

While the pro-environmental episodes of *The Simpsons* run the gamut on issues, some environmental sub-themes are more commonly addressed than others. Of the 77 pro-environmental episodes, there is a concentration in three subcategories: animal welfare (25 episodes, or about a third of all shows), energy (sixteen, or about a fifth) and camping, hiking, and wilderness (fifteen, or also about a fifth). These three subcategories represent about three quarters of all of *The Simpsons*' pro-environmental episodes. And they also generally reflect the three environmental themes that Todd found in her 2002 analysis of the first ten seasons of *The Simpsons*.

Bonfire of the Manatees (aka, the Discussion)

In *The Simpsons*' first twenty-seven seasons, the family (largely at Lisa's instigation) works diligently to save bees ("The Burns and the Bees" 20.8), buffalo ("Simpsons Tall Tales" 12.21), bulls ("Million-Dollar Abie" 17.16), butterfly pupae ("Dial 'N' for Nerder" 19.14), chickens ("The Marge-Ian Chronicles" 27.16), chimpanzees ("Simpson Safari" 12.17), greyhounds ("Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire" 1.1, "Two Dozen and One Greyhounds" 6.20), falcons ("Diggs" 25.12), lizards ("Bart the Mother" 10.3), manatees ("Bonfire of the Manatees" 17.1), raccoons ("Smoke on the Daughter" 19.15, "Lisa the Veterinarian" 27.15), snakes ("Whacking Day" 4.20), a single ant ("American History X-Cellent" 21.17), a badger ("A Tale of Two Springfields" 12.2), a bald eagle ("The Musk Who Fell to Earth" 26.12), a bear ("The Fat and the Furriest" 15.5), a canary ("C.E. D'oh" 14.1), a cow ("Apocalypse Cow" 19.17), a dolphin ("Treehouse of Horror XI" 12.1), a duckling ("The Good, the Sad, and the Drugly" 20.17), an elephant ("Bart Gets an Elephant" 5.17), a goat ("Lisa the Veterinarian" 27.15), a goldfish ("Lisa the Veterinarian" 27.15), a horse ("Saddlesore Galactica" 11.13), a lobster ("Lisa Gets an 'A'" 10.7), a St. Bernard ("Lisa the Veterinarian" 27.15), a whale ("The Squirt and the Whale" 21.19), and even alien life forms ("Treehouse of Horror XXII" 23.3). Notably, Lisa is not the only character in the show who protects animals.³⁷ Rather, it is a family affair, and the effect is that *The Simpsons* clearly stands out as an advocate of animal welfare. And of course, not every scene involving animals is about saving them or treating them well. For example, after Mr. Burns moves his power plant to Bangalore, India, Homer—in command of the plant in a way reminiscent of Marlon Brando's Col. Walter Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*—orders a monkey to fight an elephant ("Kiss Kiss, Bang Bangalore" 17.17). But more

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often than not, *The Simpsons*, more than any other long-running American sitcom, is about working to save animals.

Lisa also promotes a vegetarian diet, crystalized perhaps most famously in the episode in which Lisa eats vegetarian food with Paul and Linda McCartney and Apu Nahasapeemapetilon on the roof of Apu's Kwik-E-Mart³⁸ ("Lisa the Vegetarian" 7.5), as well as in a flash-forward episode to her future academic life on a university campus—where trees have been replaced by holographic projections, placed in memory of actual trees, and Blinky the three-eyed fish outside the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant has been replaced by six-eyed fish, fish that look like severed cow heads, and fish that look and sound like Prof. John Frink, Jr. ("Lisa's Wedding" 6.19).

"Can we get vegetarian meals at your parents' house?" Lisa asks her boyfriend, Hugh Parkfield.

"Yes, we can Lisa."

"That is good, because eating animals is wrong."

"So very wrong."

"When will the world learn?"

"I don't know. I just don't know" ["Lisa's Wedding"].

Despite Lisa, sometimes *The Simpsons* portrays vegetarianism negatively, such as when Krusty Burger starts serving the all-vegetarian Mother Nature Burgers that lead to Springfield-wide food poisoning and the invasion of Scandinavian migrant workers from Ogdenville ("Coming to Homerica" 20.21). And when Lisa's vegetarianism causes an iron deficiency, leading her to eat insects that give her nightmares and, upon release, decimate a corn maze ("Penny-Wiseguys" 24.5). There is even an entire episode that glorifies the grilling and eating of meat ("Cue Detective" 27.2). And when Homer poses as a bull and ends up in a slaughterhouse—where he narrowly escapes his own slaughter—his preference for eating meat remains only slightly tempered³⁹ ("Apocalypse Cow" 19.17), likely reflective of how many Americans respond to the thought of eating meat after learning more about how the sausage is made. In so doing, *The Simpsons* speaks to the pervasiveness of meat-eating in American society regardless of anything we learn about it.

The second major environmental subcategory I found is energy. Homer is the character most closely associated with energy, and given that he works at a nuclear power plant—and that the writers placed him there specifically so that they could critique nuclear energy (Turner 66)—it is not surprising that the show has spent so much airtime on nuclear energy. But because so much has been written about *The Simpsons* and nuclear energy,⁴⁰ I instead will discuss other energy issues addressed by *The Simpsons*.

If anything, it is surprising how much *The Simpsons* critiques conventional fossil fuels. One example is when oil is discovered beneath Springfield Elementary and the town consequently becomes an example of the resource

curse, in which the presence of economically valuable natural resources leads to worse outcomes for residents of the area. At first, great optimism reigns. The expected revenues are tapped to buy a crystal mop bucket for Groundskeeper Willie (formerly known as Dr. William MacDougal) and to hire famed Latin-jazz musician Tito Puente as a music teacher. “Today Springfield Elementary embarks on a new era, an era of unbridled spending, where petrodollars will fuel our wildest educational fantasies,” Principal Walter Seymour Skinner declares at “Oil Appreciation Day” (“Who Shot Mr. Burns? [Part One]” 6.25).

Instead, the discovery of oil leads to the destruction of Bart’s treehouse, the hospitalization and temporary crippling of his dog, the slashing of the school’s budget, the shuttering of Moe’s Tavern, the spreading of noxious fumes through Springfield, and the collapse of the Springfield Retirement Castle. The oil also fuels the greed of the nuclear (and now oil) baron Mr. Burns, who feels empowered to challenge a source of competing energy—the sun—by blotting it out in the sky. In so doing, Mr. Burns presages the actions of conventional fossil-fuel companies who today seek policies to block renewable energies such as solar power (Environment America Research and Policy Center and Frontier Group; Marston; Wieners and Hasemyer). Like fossil-fuel companies today, Mr. Burns reaches mixed success in stopping renewables. He does blot out the sun—leading Springfield residents to be dependent upon buying energy from him for lighting both day and night⁴¹—but he is subsequently shot, collapsing onto the town sundial.

The resource curse reprises with natural gas twenty seasons later, when *The Simpsons* takes on hydraulic fracturing, AKA hydrofracking or fracking. Natural-gas deposits are discovered beneath Springfield, and Mr. Burns appoints Homer as his “chief energy innovation marketing director” in a conversation that could mirror that between someone in the fracking industry and a confused member of the general public:

“All you’ve got to do is sell fracking to your friends and neighbors,” Mr. Burns instructs Homer.

“Woo hoo?” Homer asks. “I don’t know, fracking is one of those scary Lisa words.”

“Bah! Fracking produces enough clean natural gas to make America independent of sheiks, caliphs, and Scandinavians. Not to mention, it doesn’t create any of that awful worker-mutating nuclear waste.”

A glowing nuclear worker with four eyes and four ears interrupts to remind Homer to set his fantasy-football lineup.

“Maybe fracking isn’t so bad,” Homer says.

“Then say yes to this raise, this promotion and this flannel shirt that says, ‘I’m not screwing you over!’” Mr. Burns replies⁴² [“Opposites A-Frack” 26.5].

The Simpsons also values renewable energy. For example, Springfield is host to an Alternative Energy Derby—a green equivalent of the soapbox Derby, featuring kid-made hydrogen-, wind-, and solar-powered derby cars⁴³ (“Paths of Glory” 27.8).

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And Homer, bothered by his high electric bills, buys a windmill at an alternative-energy expo (which Mr. Burns pickets as “unfair to earth poisoners”) and takes the family off grid⁴⁴ (“The Squirt and the Whale” 21.19).

That is not to say that all episodes are kind to renewable energy, though. Springfield also hosts a solar-powered (and thereby underpowered and ineffectual) electric chair (“Lisa the Tree Hugger” 12.4).

While Lisa is associated with animal welfare and Homer with energy, Lisa, Homer and Bart—the three characters around whom I have found that *The Simpsons'* plots, particularly those with pro-environmental themes, revolve most—are all featured in episodes that promote nature positively. (With Lisa still featured in more than the others, of course.)

For example, when Lisa joins Dirt First (in perhaps the only sitcom episode to ever address or parody the radical environmental group Earth First⁴⁵), she camps out in the branches of Springfield's oldest redwood tree, using the tactic made famous by Julia “Butterfly” Hill and other tree sitters to attempt saving the tree from the chainsaw (“Lisa the Tree Hugger”).

When visiting Arizona, Homer enjoys the splendor of the Grand Canyon despite having a dozen stinging scorpions on his back. “Wow, I never thought there'd be something I'd want to stare at longer than that car wreck on the way here,” Homer remarks. “This has got to be the most beautiful thing we ever stole from the Indians” (“Fland Canyon” 27.19).

And even Bart enjoys horseback riding with Superintendent Gary Chalmers around Springfield National Forest (“Bart Stops to Smell the Roosevelt” 23.2).

On the rare occasions when *The Simpsons'* peer sitcoms address nature and wilderness, it was almost always portrayed as a scary place where bad things happened—such as getting lost and being chased by bears. And while *The Simpsons* has had a bit of that fearmongering around nature and wilderness, more often than not the characters in *The Simpsons* have approached nature and wilderness as a place of beauty and awe and worthy of conservation.

Maybe You Can Win Friends with Salad (aka, the Conclusion)

The Simpsons also has had much commentary on protection of nature and the environment writ large—and the role of right-wing politicians in removing legal protections for nature. For example, at a meeting of the Springfield Republicans, Mr. Burns seeks ideas for new legislation (or, as he puts it, “What act of unmitigated evil shall the Republican Party undertake this week?”) (“Brawl in the Family” 13.7).

“What about this dang environment?” Rich Texan asks. “Back in Texas we got rid of it and made everyone a lot happier.”

“Excellent!” Burns replies, tenting only his pointer fingers. “We shall destroy the environment by scrapping every antipollution law” (Cohen and Nastuk “Brawl in the Family”).

Recycling becomes a felony. Smokey the Bear is replaced by Choppy the Lumberjack. Springfield’s wetlands are drained. Spotted-owl habitat protections are removed, allowing for Nelson to give noogies to a spotted owl. Steel mills, smoke factories, and even daycare centers belch jet-black smoke into the air. Acid rain drenches the town, dissolving people’s clothes, melting the squirrels and even melting the Simpsons’ TV antenna (“Brawl in the Family” 13.7). Aired in 2002, the episode served as an exaggerated warning for plans of the second Bush administration to revoke environmental protections—but the warning is just as potent today, as the Trump administration—the rise of which was famously predicted by *The Simpsons* in 2000⁴⁶ (“Bart to the Future” 11.17)—revokes environmental protections at an unprecedented rate (Greshko, et al.; Popvich, et al.). In its decades on the air, *The Simpsons* has been not just relevant but insightful and visionary.

Overall, aside from being the longest-running sitcom in American history, *The Simpsons* also consistently has been the one of the most environmentally oriented sitcoms on American television. There certainly have been anti-environmental episodes of *The Simpsons*, but there have been three-and-a-half times as many pro-environmental as anti-environmental episodes. Although we have entered the era of the internet, television programming remains a powerful force, if not the defining element, of American culture—and because of that, there may be no better example of banal environmentalism at work than *The Simpsons*.

Bat Groening, I. Scream Cohen and Friends (aka, the Acknowledgments)

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NOTES

1. After three years of running as one-minute-long animated shorts on *The Tracey Ullman Show*, the first-ever episode of *The Simpsons* was a Christmas special and began without the typical opening that the show would use for decades. Instead, it opened with Homer and

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Marge Simpson driving through the snow on their way to the annual Christmas pageant at Bart and Lisa's school ("Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire" 1.1).

2. Although they did not originally develop nudge theory, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein popularized it. In their book, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, they focused on intentional choices made to push people to make decisions desired by others (Thaler and Sunstein, pp. 1–320). For example, a grocer may nudge a consumer to buy a product by placing it on a prominent shelf within the store.

3. Two other researchers have espoused the notion of banal environmentalism—and, in a case of multiple discovery (synchronicity or simultaneous invention), they did so at nearly the same time at two different universities in England. In September 2008, Ryan Cunningham completed his master's thesis on banal environmentalism at the London School of Economics (Cunningham). The following month at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, Tom Hargreaves completed his doctoral thesis, which focused in part on banal environmentalism (Hargreaves).

4. To what degree does each exposure to banal environmentalism affect one's views on the environment? Research into the effects of exposure to other banal factors—such as violence in video games (Bartholow, et al.; Engelhardt, et al.) and body-image types depicted in media (Aglia and Tantleff-Dunn; Harper and Tiggemann)—show a strong correlation between exposure and changes in subjects' actions and attitudes. Whether exposure to environmentally minded media—such as environmentally minded episodes of *The Simpsons*—is similarly impactful warrants research.

5. Banal environmentalism is notably different from mundane environmentalism (Poloni-Staudinger), which refers to environmental activities of little or no consequence and/or sacrifice. For example, driving an electric car or maintaining a vegetarian diet would not be mundane in that such actions can have substantial impact on an individual scale and also can involve sacrifice, but they could be banal in their everyday execution and/or in the consumption of their representation in the media. However, banal environmentalism and mundane environmentalism are not mutually exclusive. Recycling—what may be the quintessential act of mundane environmentalism, since it typically merely requires placing a waste product in a different bin, usually inches away from the standard trash bin—may be a case of both banal and mundane environmentalism at play. Recycling is mundane in that it has little impact compared to more significant environmental issues, and in that it requires little effort or sacrifice. Recycling also can be banal in its daily, repetitive and relatively unconscious practice and devotion. The mundaneness and banality of recycling shows how far our society has come on environmental issues over the lifetime of *The Simpsons*. At the time of the show's debut in December 1989, recycling arguably was the biggest environmental issue on the public agenda. About a month before *The Simpsons*' first episode, *Murphy Brown* aired its first of what would become four episodes that addressed the environment in a positive light—and it was all about encouraging recycling and why it's important to reduce and separate one's waste (Dukane et al.). Recycling may be mundane because of the emergence of significantly larger environmental problems such as climate change, but the banality of recycling—which has gone from a fringe to a mainstream activity over the last few decades (Environmental Protection Agency "Municipal Solid Waste"; Environmental Protection Agency "Recycling and Composting Trends")—is one of the largest success stories in the environmental movement's history (although ample opportunities for waste-management improvement remain).

6. Formerly part of News Corporation and likely by the time you read this to be part of the Walt Disney Company, as predicted by *The Simpsons* in 1998 ("When You Dish Upon a Star" 10.5).

7. The largest other studies of television content that I could find have involved samples of television shows rather than entire populations or a show's entire run—such as researchers watching a few hours of television daily for a week. The sample was used as a basis for estimating frequency across the entire series. In contrast, I did not sample shows but rather analyzed the content of every episode for 76 television shows.

8. Indeed, in its first twenty-seven seasons, *The Simpsons* has won eight Environmental Media Awards, twice that of any other television show, including *Bill Nye the Science Guy*, *Captain Planet*, and *The Lazy Environmentalist* (Environmental Media Association).

9. And Maria Rosaria Di Nucci at the Free University of Berlin's Environmental Policy Research Centre applied *The Simpsons* to the non-animated world by developing theories on how communities that host nuclear power plants relate to them. She labels those towns that "derive strong economic advantages from the nuclear industry connected with the value chain of the nuclear facilities on their territory" as Springfield communities, named after the town the Simpson family calls home. Further, she describes the effect of communities that are proud of their nuclear facilities, like Springfield is in *The Simpsons*, as Springfield Syndrome (Di Nucci, 119–144; Di Nucci and Brunnengräber). Springfield residents tend to be more proud than embarrassed of their nuclear plant (and even their nuclear-enhanced three-eyed fish; hence the moniker for its pending and ultimately unrealized professional football league team is the Meltdowns (Long and Moore) and its minor-league baseball team is the Isotopes (Levine, et al.), a name borrowed later in the non-animated world by the minor-league baseball team in a city with Springfield Syndrome—Albuquerque, N.M., about sixty miles away as the three-eyed crow flies from Los Alamos National Laboratory, where the first atomic bomb was developed.

10. Silvia Ceausu and Tamara Steger took a similar approach, scanning the transcripts of a single season of *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *South Park* for environmental topics. Their data was limited in covering only a single season and in being comingled among the three shows. In aggregate in the three shows, they described the top environmental topics as automobiles and fuel consumption, wildlife, Al Gore, and extreme weather (Ceausu and Steger).

11. Just as much as Lisa serves as an eco-hero, she is also an archetype of the marginalized eco-feminist vegetarian dissident killjoy (Grant and MacKenzie-Dale, 307–329; Freeman, 193–212; Todd, 73–76).

12. "Urban poultry farming is a great way to reduce our carbon footprint!" Lisa opines. "Or maybe increase it. I'm not sure" ("The Marge-ian Chronicles" 27.16).

13. Homer: "Global warming: Huh. By pure coincidence, every scientist was right" ("White Christmas Blues" 25.8).

14. It is also possible to address climate change without mentioning the term "climate change," both indirectly (for example, Midwestern no-till farmers [Tabuchi]) as well as through metaphors, parables and allegories (for example, the film *Mother!* [Ryzik])—although that method may not always result in the message being received (Brody).

15. Of course, I cannot reference McLuhan without hearing him say, "You know nothing of my work. You mean my whole fallacy is wrong" (Allen).

16. The 116 networks are A&E, ABC, Adult Swim, AMC, American Heroes Channel, Animal Planet, ASPIRE, Audience, AWE, AXS TV, BabyFirst, BabyTV, BBC America, BET, Boomerang, Bravo, Cartoon Network, CBS, Centric, Chiller, Cinemax, Cloo, CMT, Comedy Central, Cooking Channel, Create, Crime & Investigation Network, Destination America, Discovery Channel, Discovery Family, Discovery Life, Disney Channel, Disney Junior, Disney XD, DIY Network, E!, El Rey Network, Epix, Esquire Network, Flix, Food Network, 20th Century-Fox, Freeform, FX, FXM, FXX, FYI, GSN, Hallmark Channel, Hallmark Movies & Mysteries, HBO, HDNet Movies, HGTV, History, IFC, INSP, Investigation Discovery, Ion, Ion Life, Lifetime, Lifetime Real Women, LMN, Logo TV, MGM HD, Military History, MoviePlex, MTV, MTV Classic, MTV2, MyNetworkTV, NASA TV, Nat Geo Wild, National Geographic Channel, NBC, Nick at Nite, Nick Jr., Nick2, Nickelodeon, NickMusic, Nicktoons, Ovation, OWN, Oxygen, PBS, Pivot, Pop, Qubo, Reelz, Science, Showtime, Smithsonian Channel, Sony Movie Channel, Spike, Sprout, Starz, Starz Encore, SundanceTV, Syfy, TBS, TeenNick, The CW, The Movie Channel, TLC, TNT, Travel Channel, truTV, Turner Classic Movies, TV Land, TV One, Universal HD, Up, USA Network, VH1, Viceland, WE tv, and WGN America.

17. However, I only count seasons as they originally aired. For example, even though *Meet the Browns* was released on DVD as seven seasons, it originally aired as five seasons and was subsequently excluded from this study.

18. In chronological order, the 76 sitcoms are *Cheers*, *Newhart*, *Night Court*, *The Cosby Show*, *Who's the Boss?*, *The Golden Girls*, *Growing Pains*, *Perfect Strangers*, *Designing Women*, *Married ... with Children*, *Full House*, *Empty Nest*, *Roseanne*, *Murphy Brown*, *Coach*, *Seinfeld*, *Family Matters*, *The Simpsons*, *Wings*, *Rugrats*, *Home Improvement*, *Step by Step*, *Beavis and*

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Butt-Head, Mad About You, Saved by the Bell: The New Class, Frasier, Boy Meets World, Friends, The Drew Carey Show, Arliss (AKA Arli\$), Everybody Loves Raymond, Sabrina the Teenage Witch, King of the Hill, Just Shoot Me!, South Park, That '70s Show, Will & Grace, The King of Queens, Family Guy, Futurama, SpongeBob SquarePants, Malcolm in the Middle, Girlfriends, Curb Your Enthusiasm, Aqua Teen Hunger Force, The Fairly OddParents, Scrubs, According to Jim, Monk, Two and a Half Men, Entourage, American Dad!, The Office, It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia, Weeds, How I Met Your Mother, 30 Rock, Squidbillies, Psych, The Game, Rules of Engagement, Tyler Perry's House of Payne, Californication, iCarly, The Big Bang Theory, The Mentalist, Parks and Recreation, Royal Pains, Nurse Jackie, Archer, Modern Family, The Middle, The League, Adventure Time, Regular Show, and Childrens Hospital.

19. Inevitably, in scouring the sitcoms aired by 116 television networks over 27 seasons, it is possible I missed a show that meets the criteria set forth in this research.

20. Double-length episodes count as two episodes, triple-length episodes count as three episodes (and so on). *Adventure Time, Regular Show, SpongeBob SquarePants* and *The Fairly OddParents* episodes are for 11-minute segments, with double-length segments counted here as two episodes. A season's worth of *Regular Show* shorts (each about two minutes in length) count here as one episode.

21. Some may take issue with the inclusion of vegetarianism/veganism as an environmental issue, but given that the greenhouse gases released through meat production and consumption is either the single-largest contributor to climate change (Steinfeld, et al.)—or at the very least a major driver of climate change (Hedenu, et al; Ripple, et al.)—vegetarianism/veganism may be the most environmentally oriented subject of them all.

22. "Don't kid yourself, Jimmy, if a cow ever got the chance, he'd eat you and everyone you care about"—Troy McClure in the educational film "Meat and You: Partners In Freedom"—Number 3F03 in the "Resistance Is Useless Series"—presented by the Meat Council, in "Lisa the Vegetarian" (7.5).

23. The coding is inherently subjective, and as such another person may have coded some of the episodes differently. That said, with a population of nearly 14,000 episodes, the addition or subtraction of an environmentally themed episode here or there would not have made significant shifts in the overall percentages of environmentally themed episodes.

24. Crossover episodes are counted only as an episode of the host show. For example, when the characters of *The Simpsons* guest star in an episode of *Family Guy*, the episode only counts as an episode of *Family Guy* and not as an episode of *The Simpsons*.

25. Indeed, *The Simpsons Movie* may be the only non-documentary film whose main characters include the administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and whose plot is driven by the actions of the EPA.

26. Given the name of the show, though, perhaps not quite as many pro-environmental episodes as one might expect.

27. *Futurama's* writers include Kristin Gore, daughter of climate advocate and former Vice President Al Gore—but she was only a writer on the show for two seasons, during which only 17 percent of *Futurama's* pro-environmental episodes were written. Gore herself only wrote one of the show's pro-environmental episodes, and the show's seasons with the most pro-environmental episodes occur before and after her tenure.

28. It remains to be seen if Groening's new sitcom, *Disenchantment*, also will take on environmental issues at a great frequency.

29. Have you ever thought about why the grandfather of future-oriented cartoons, *The Jetsons*, is set in the clouds? Perhaps it is because future society has retreated to the heavens after having made the surface environmentally uninhabitable.

30. During the first 27 seasons of *The Simpsons*, episodes that are set in the future feature a pro-environmental theme at a slightly higher rate (14 percent) than those set in the present, but the population of future-set episodes (seven) is small.

31. That the characters of *Parks and Recreation* work in a parks department does not necessarily mean that episode themes will be about parks, although that was the case. By comparison, *Regular Show* is also about staffers at a park, and its episodes feature the environment in a positive light less than two percent of the time.

32. Due to rounding, four shows with less than 0.5 percent are recorded here as 0 percent. (For example, a show with one pro-environmental episode out of a total of 273 episodes is rounded from 0.37 percent to 0 percent.) Similarly, seven shows that fall between 0.5 percent and 1 percent are rounded up to 1 percent.

33. *Newhart* actually has no environmentally minded episodes at all; *Full House* has only one, which portrayed agriculture in a negative light; and *Monk* has four, although all are in a negative light.

34. Although about twenty years later, *The Simpsons* partially makes up for its disparagement of public transit in “Marge vs. the Monorail” by bringing in “greatest living inventor” Elon Musk to develop the Springfield Hyperloop. Like the monorail before it, the hyperloop also fails, but the reason is fiscal rather than technological. While the monorail salesman, Lyle Lanley, was painted as an opportunistic huckster, Musk the hyperloop salesman was portrayed as a futuristic tech-savvy genius idealist willing to sacrifice profit for fulfillment of mission. “Our purpose is to show the planet how to save itself,” Musk says. But three seasons later (and outside the purview of this study) the monorail itself returns, wreaking havoc through the city once again and ultimately costing Mayor Joseph (Joe) Fitzgerald O’Malley Fitzpatrick O’Donnell The Edge Quimby his job (“The Old Blue Mayor Ain’t What She Used to Be” 29.6).

35. Two of the twenty-three shows are rounded down to 0 percent. A total of twenty-one shows do not have a single episode with an environmental theme.

36. Perhaps most prominently, Canadian journalist Chris Turner posited that *The Simpsons’* best years were from 1992 to 1997 (3).

37. Although Lisa is a card-carrying member of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Amoebas), The League of Women Vultures, The NAACPorcupines, Kids for Squids, ACLU-nicorns, and Clamnesty International (“How Munched Is That Birdie in the Window?” 22.7).

38. Sam Simon, co-creator of *The Simpsons*, was a vegetarian and then a vegan for almost all of his adult life, but he dismissed that he was responsible for Lisa’s views on vegetarianism (Nell), and he did not write the famous episode “Lisa the Vegetarian” (7.5).

39. Homer: “The things I saw, makes me want to never eat meat again—just fish, chicken, burgers, veal on Fridays, deer but only in season, and if necessary the sweetest meat of all, human” (“Apocalypse Cow” 19.17).

40. From impotence to genetic mutations to the threat of nuclear fallout, *The Simpsons* demonstrates over and over again the dangers of radiation from nuclear energy.

41. The end of sunlight prompts *The Springfield Shopper* to publish a helpful edition titled, “Your Guide to Perpetual Darkness” (“Who Shot Mr. Burns? [Part One]” 6.25).

42. In the next scene, Homer is at home in the kitchen with Bart, practicing saying over and over again in different ways, “I’m not screwing you over” (“Opposites a-Frack” 26.5).

43. And where tents promote some of the derby’s sponsors, “National Petroleum: Greening the Arctic” and “Putt-Putt Power: Mini-Golf Windmill Farms” (“Paths of Glory” 27.8).

44. Lisa: “Dad, you are leading the way in clean energy.”

Homer: “Yep, I Al Gore’d it pretty good” (“The Squirt and the Whale” 21.19).

45. *The Simpsons* also may be the only sitcom to ever address or parody the environmental guerilla group Earth Liberation Front—or, as it is known in Springfield, the Earth Liberation Army (“Homerland” 25.1) (not to be confused with the actual but much lesser known Earth Liberation Army in the non-animated world).

46. President Lisa Simpson, taking over from President Donald Trump: “My administration will focus on the three Rs: reading, writing and refilling the ocean” (“Bart to the Future” 11.17).

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