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Edition



As seen in



Life

August 31, 2004

# Danny Seo, rolling in green

## Young, hip eco-stylist is saving the world, one celebrity at a time

By Marco R. della Cava  
USA TODAY

SAN FRANCISCO — Say "environment" to Danny Seo, and it's as if you've punched the word into the search engine Google: Out roars an avalanche of ideas and references that threatens to scramble your brain.

But a day spent racing between business appointments with this self-described eco-stylist finally reveals his succinct and daring philosophy: Ask not what you can do for the environment, but what the environment can do for you.

Seriously.

For example, Mother Nature can help make you hipper (think Toyota Prius hybrid cars), healthier (organic foods keep toxins at bay) and wealthier (recycle some free wallpaper samples and turn the living-room wall into a quilt-like marvel).

And you thought being green meant being jeered as a granola and wearing unsightly sandals? Seo says bring on the Armani — the designer's hemp denim collection, that is.

"I think it's possible to live an eco-friendly existence that embraces style," says Seo, 27, who has spent the past 15

years working as an environmental activist, author, magazine columnist and lecturer.

He's negotiating with a few high-profile cable channels to do a reality show — SuperNatural Style With Danny Seo — in which he'll dispense an array of healthy-living pearls. And Seo will be prowling New York's Fashion Week, Sept. 8-15, luring models and celebrities to his Re-Treat party, for which the price of admission is your old cellphone battery.

"My job isn't to convince you to protect the environment," he says. "I'm also not here to tell you this is cool. But I am here to tell you that it's just an easier way to live, and it helps the environment."

Confused? Here's his light-bulb moment: "A flat-screen TV is very high-tech and trendy. But some are also far more energy-efficient than those bulky tube TVs, so you'll also save on bills."

Wow, guilt-free consumerism.

"He's fun, he's smart, and he makes it seem so uncool not to think about the Earth," says actress and friend Rosario Dawson. "He's a new Martha Stewart."

The M word. Given the growing awareness of environmental issues and Seo's access to the celebrity set, this soft-spoken Korean-American from rural

### As easy as ...

Got eco-sense? Danny Seo's three easy steps to having some:

1. Use biodegradable cleaners around the house. Seo's favorites include the all-natural brand Method for everything from dish soap (\$5.49) to wood polish (\$5.99) and phosphate-free Seventh Generation laundry detergent (\$7.99, all prices drugstore.com).
2. When buying appliances and electronics, look for the Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star label. These high-efficiency models use fewer resources and sometimes come with financial incentives.
3. Recycle your old cellphone and rechargeable batteries, whose elements are particularly harmful to the environment. Go to the Rechargeable Battery Recycling Corp. website (rbrbc.org) and look up no-cost area drop-off locations.

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Pennsylvania could have a shot at Martha's mantle.

After all, she may have been chummy with the traditional American family, but Danny's crowd is younger and impressed by starry shopping forays that range from helping Chynna Phillips find a fluffy, down-free comforter to advising Brad Pitt on purchasing a hybrid vehicle.

### Another omni-media?

Seo won't comment on Stewart's fall from grace but reveres her dedication to quality and the brand: "Martha owns that space. Everyone else just follows."

That's not to say he isn't busy making his move.

In addition to the TV show, which he's crafting with Hearst Entertainment, Seo and his small team at Danny Seo Media Ventures are putting together a cross between a magazine and a catalog. ("I might call it a magalog," he says, arching an eyebrow.)

It will be filled with organic products that range from cleaning supplies to holiday gifts, as well as clever crafts tips along the lines of taking the oyster shells from that last seafood meal, filling them with a soy-based wax and creating decorative table candles.

"If I have a style, it would be called country acid," Seo says.

Indeed, Seo loves the rural life. When he's not bouncing between the coasts, Seo hunkers down in a 172-year-old house on a 500-acre Christmas tree farm, not far from where he grew up in Reading, Pa.

Seo, born fatefully on Earth Day (April 22), is the youngest of three children of an anesthesiologist father and a stay-at-home mom. The eco-epiphany came on his 12th birthday. He had read about the rain forest burning and whales being killed, and he announced to his mother that he was now a vegetarian.

Her confused response: "No, Danny, you're a Taurus."

Seo says his parents remain uninvolved in his career, "but they taught me great critical thinking skills." His sister in Virginia is a teacher, while his Bay Area attorney brother "has some sort of Chandler Bing job — you know, the kind you don't really get."

Not long after that birthday party in 1989, the young idealist founded an environmental group called Earth 2000. The aim was to save the planet in a mere nine years. (Hey, he was 12.)

The group did manage to get local environmental legislation passed, at about the time when Seo was flunking high school civics. He passed on attending college and instead dedicated himself to writing, both for magazines (he's an editor-at-large at

Organic Style) and book publishers (Generation React: Activism for Beginners and Conscious Style Home: Eco-Friendly Living for the 21st Century).

### 'Club sandwiches, not seals'

Seo's style and youth caught Oprah Winfrey's eye; not long after he popped up on her show in 1998, People magazine named him one of their "50 Most Beautiful People."

Today, Seo remains largely focused on the nexus of fashion and sustainable living. But he hasn't given up his activist ways.

A passionate anti-fur crusader, he managed to draw attention to the ongoing horror of baby seal clubbing in typically Seo style. Wandering around the Sundance Film Festival a few years back, Seo came across Paris Hilton, who was intrigued by his T-shirt: "Club sandwiches, not seals."

He promptly produced one in her size, she wore it, photographers snapped her in it, People magazine ran the image, and soon Abercrombie & Fitch started selling the tees.

"I don't judge celebrities," Seo says. "If I can use their power for a purpose, though, what's wrong with that?"

More power to you, says William Schlesinger, dean of Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences, where enrollment has doubled in the past three years.

"Hey, if I could get my hands on spokespeople like that to spread my message, I would in an instant," Schlesinger says. "While there isn't a huge groundswell (of the masses going green) just yet, there's no doubt Seo could be catching an early wave."

But many manufacturers already speak Seo's language of eco-stylishness. Officials with the Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star program, which rates the most efficient appliances on the market, say the number of products that make the grade has nearly tripled to 28,000 since 2000.

"People are looking for a product with the style and features they need but then are also asking if it will save them money," says EPA spokeswoman Maria Vargas.

"That's a huge behavioral shift. What's next is making sure people realize that when they save that money, they're also saving the environment."

### Sleeping especially easy

Seo works that very vein, using the carrot of savings to prompt an eco-conscious choice.

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That's what has brought him to this famously green town; he's meeting with executives of Kimpton Hotels, a chain of 40 boutique properties around the USA.

They've hired Seo to help expand the eco-suite concept — energy-efficient lighting, green linens and the like — that has been so successful at the local Triton Hotel, where Seo is designing his own signature suite not far from the planet-friendly bamboo retreat designed by Woody Harrelson.

"Occupancy dipped after Sept. 11, but demand for these suites remained high," says Kimpton marketing vice president Steve Pinetti. "People stay in them to feel they're doing something for the Earth."

Seo bounces into the conference room with a few props, including Ethos bottled water (proceeds help bring clean water to Third World children) and The Preserve toothbrushes (made from recycled yogurt cups; the manufacturer melts mailed-back used brushes into park benches).

He breezes through his life story, then hammers home his point that consumers need to be given the tools to be do-gooders: "We're telling people to be eco-conscious, but we're not telling them how."

Heads nod in the executive ranks, although they still seem

stunned to be taking cues from a twentysomething who looks like a barista.

But then Seo wows them with a few funky notions that he likens to MacGyver on an eco-trip. Like suggesting that the hotel tell guests to mix used coffee grounds from the in-room machine with cleansing lotion from the bathroom for a top-notch exfoliating scrub.

He finishes to applause and heads for the street where the bellman hails him a cab.

Seo is tired, but he has many more eco-chats to go before he sleeps. Besides, he really doesn't have an off switch. The planet still needs saving, and he still needs more ideas of how to get people to help him save it.

"Something I forgot to mention to you," he says. "Another advantage of a hybrid car is that you get to drive in the carpool lane even if you're alone."

Actually, that rule has not yet been greenlighted by federal officials.

"Really?" asks Seo. Big exhale, then a smile. "Maybe I just heard it from myself."

### Celebs do their part at home, on road

Even the greenest Hollywood celebrity isn't likely to swap the Gucci-and-Gulfstream lifestyle for a solar-powered yurt anytime soon. But some stars are making an effort to be less wasteful. Among eco-stylist Danny Seo's favorite famous crusaders:

► **Brad Pitt.** "Gave up all his cars and only drives hybrids. . . . It's believed the gardens of his Los Angeles home are organic. Keep your eye on him to be the next eco-celeb activist."

► **Pierce Brosnan and Keely Shaye Smith.** "This Hollywood power couple has devoted serious time to a number of green and animal rights charities," most recently "saving the last remaining native redwoods in California." Shaye Smith also is a dedicated organic gardener.

► **Edward Norton.** "Big supporter of solar energy" who recently "teamed up with BP Solar to create a program that incorporates solar energy into low-income housing."

► **Christina Aguilera.** "The Dirty girl actually cleans up. Her contract rider for a recent concert tour requested organic fruit, organic soy milk and no disposable plates, dishes, cups." Also, she supports the Natural Resources Defense Council.

► **Cameron Diaz.** Taped a series of eco-minded public service announcements with pal Gwyneth Paltrow. "She basically made driving a hybrid smart, sexy and cool."

► **Kevin Richardson.** This Backstreet Boy has green homes in both Kentucky and Los Angeles, featuring solar paneling and "a gray water system, which recycles (waste) water. . . . He recently converted one of his cars to run on natural gas and has his own gas pump at his house."



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**APPLICATIONS:** *environment, cause & effect, analysis, research*

**DISCUSSION:** Who is Danny Seo? What is his environmental philosophy? What ventures is Seo in the process of starting? When did he have his “eco-epiphany”? On what is Seo primarily focused? How does he prompt consumers to make eco-conscious choices?

**ACTIVITY:** ENERGY STAR is a government-supported program that encourages individuals and businesses to protect the environment by helping them make energy efficient choices.\* Make a list of all of the appliances and other items in your home that use energy (e.g., ovens, toasters, TVs, clock radios, curling irons, etc.). Take an inventory of the brands and model numbers you are currently using. Then, through research, identify an alternate brand or model that meets ENERGY STAR's approval. Create a graphic organizer that compares and contrasts the results of your findings.

\*Source: [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov)



### VOCABULARY

1. succinct

2. hybrid

3. forays

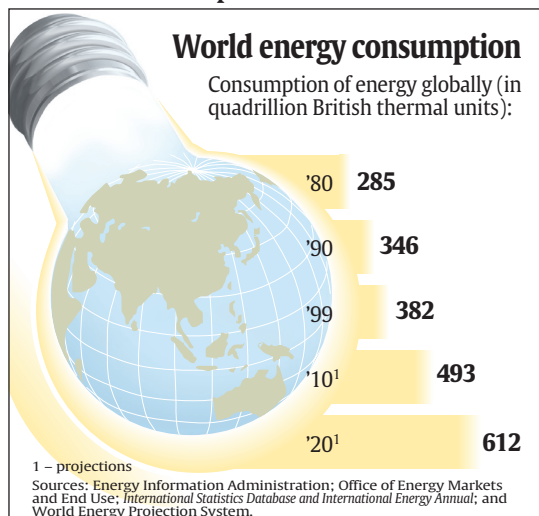
4. epiphany

5. nexus

6. ethos

## Focus on: Energy

### USA TODAY Snapshots®



By Shannon Reilly and Marcy E. Mullins, USA TODAY

**APPLICATIONS:** *trends, statistics, science, application, problem solving*

Identify at least three factors that have led to the increase in world energy consumption. Do you think the dramatic rise in energy use is cause for concern? Explain.

In 1998, 86% of the energy produced globally came from oil, natural gas and coal. These three resources accounted for 85% of the U.S.'s total energy consumption. About 11% of the energy Americans consumed came from nuclear and hydro-

electric power. Geothermal, biomass, solar and wind energy sources provided the remaining 4%.\*

Which of the above resources are non-renewable? Which are renewable? Why aren't renewable sources of energy widely produced or consumed in the U.S. and around the globe? How could humans, and Americans in particular, fix this imbalance?

\*Source: U.S. Geological Survey