

Green is the new black

It used to be we chose clothes for their look. Now, as JILL FRASER writes, the trend is to dress with the planet in mind

Eco fashion has become the ultra-cool, sexy alternative for increasing numbers of sustainable-savvy consumers as young, ethically conscious designers create beauty and durability out of hemp, bamboo, organic cotton, soy and corn fibre.

A former model, now green campaigner and author, Tanya Ha is uncomfortable with the suggestion that this may be just another fashion trend and argues that the swing to making environmentally responsible consumer choices in fashion is part of a global go-for-green movement.

She does, however, express concern that the large retailers that offered organic cotton lines last year may simply be plugging into the sustainability buzzword rather than making a paradigm shift within their organisations.

“The one thing the garment industry listens to is what walks out the door, so the change will need to be consumer driven rather than relying on the conscience of the industry,” Ha says.

The push for environment-and-people-friendly textiles emerged from hippie communes and is starting to be taken up by top fashion houses and high-street retailers. It is anchored solidly in statistics that demonstrate the heavy ecological footprint of the fashion industry.

The World Health Organization says it takes around one-third of a kilogram of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides to produce an average pair of jeans from conventional cotton.

This fact is given extra weight by organisations such as the Allergy, Sensitivity & Environmental Health Association Qld Inc, which refers to the body as “a giant sponge”, and the US Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety & Health Administration which states that “the skin readily absorbs many chemicals”.

Add to the equation the facts that the World Health Organization says 20,000 people die every year from accidental pesticide poisoning in conventional cotton agriculture, that every kilogram of cotton grown in Australia uses 4268 litres of water (the washing process in denim production alone consumes between 7000 and 29,000 litres of water per kilogram) and that 100 million conventional cotton farmers, from Russians to South Africans, are living in poverty, and eco fashion starts to look like the rational option.

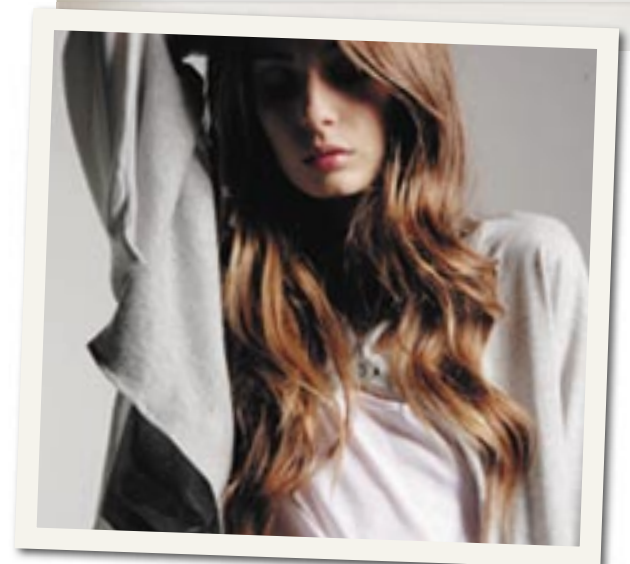
Admitting the 80s tag “ethical fashion” “sounds about as much fun as brown bread with no butter”, Sue Thomas, lecturer in fashion in the School of Architecture and Design RMIT University, Melbourne, is waiting for the day when the term “eco fashion” has been relegated to the fashion archives.

“We’ll no longer be talking about it because it just is. I look forward to this discussion being redundant,” she laughs.

Right: Like more and more companies, Bassike uses environmentally sustainable organic cotton.



Clockwise from bottom left: Helen Kaminski Gail hat made from sustainably grown raffia \$235. Bird rag bag made using 100 per cent solar power \$135. Bird nurse's cape made using water-based dyes \$345. Pure Pod Ignite top made from bamboo and organic cotton \$66. Bird tie dress made using water-based dyes \$260. Fully Stoked bra made from sustainably grown cotton \$18. Gorman organic cotton pyjama top, \$69 for top and pant. Pure Pod Pride wrap skirt made from hemp and soy linen \$242. Helen Kaminski bag made from sustainably grown raffia \$295. Pure Pod Hope swing bamboo and organic cotton top \$275. Nudie Tight Long Jon jeans in 100 per cent organic light eco wash \$320. Etiko low-cut sneakers (certified free trade and sustainable) \$65.





MAIN PHOTOGRAPH BY RUSTY WHITE, STYLING BY ELIZABETH GRAHAM

“Rather like organic food, which was once wild and trippy and now is just one part of the building blocks of putting a meal together, sustainable clothing will follow a similar path.

“People are becoming more conscious of the interconnectivity of things and, while we mightn’t be able to save the planet every time we put something on our backs, if we know the choice is there we’re free to make it.”

Katie Patrick, CEO and founder of Green Pages, who late last year coordinated Australia’s first green fashion parade featuring a number of top Australian brands, agrees.

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The parade was a sparkling affair, its centrepiece a spectacular chandelier made entirely of discarded and reused bottles collected from restaurants and cafes in Sydney’s Walsh Bay.

Patrick claims the idea that green refers

to one particular niche group and carries a social stigma is dated: “How much you earn, what you drive and who you vote for has no bearing whatsoever on whether you will choose to wear eco fashion.”

Her one fear, which aligns with Ha’s, is

eco fashion



that the fashion industry as a whole may have to be dragged screaming into the ecologically conscious universe.

Award-winning designer Rachel Bending is a pioneer in sustainable fashion design practices. Her work started in 2002 with Slingsfings, a brand widely recognised for its environmental consciousness. Bird Textiles, launched in March 2006, continues the brand ethos.

Slingsfings garments are made from reclaimed vintage fabrics. Bird garments are made from fabrics designed in house and hand-printed using water-based dyes. Gift wraps are printed on recycled paper stock using soy inks, and products in the homewares and lifestyle fashion ranges are manufactured using 100 per cent renewable solar power.

“There’s been a trend in the fashion industry towards disposable clothing and this is being phased out as retailers start to bow to pressure from consumers regarding environmental issues and ethical sourcing,” says Bending.

“There is no justification, apart from the



Italian-made Nudie jeans are made from 100 per cent organic materials and production.

resistant and highly breathable and it can be grown without pesticides and fertilisers.

Kelli Donovan began life as a designer of mass-produced children’s gear in Melbourne but was so disillusioned by the amount of waste and pollution, she headed north to Bangalow on the NSW north coast. There,

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dollar, for cheap off-shore manufacturing. The hidden cost is the virtual slave labour used to produce cheap clothing and as consumers we’re kidding ourselves if we think we’re getting a cheap deal. The big picture is the way the production of unrealistically cheap clothes impacts on the environment and the people making them.”

Creating a fashion item at a competitive price need not impact detrimentally on the environment or compromise human rights, says Darren McFarlane, who established Eco Wear in Melbourne’s Southbank two years ago. Seventy per cent of McFarlane’s range is hemp, which not only requires less water and pesticide than conventional cotton but also retains dyes effectively, which means fewer chemicals in the dyeing process.

“Hemp is perfect for our climate because it breathes, is comfortable and doesn’t retain body odour in hot weather,” he says.

Like hemp, bamboo is naturally bacteria-

she established Pure Pod, a clothing line based primarily on bamboo and employing cutters who use solar energy.

Cost-wise, Donovan’s range is on par with boutique store garments. The consensus is that eco fashion is generally slightly pricier than conventional lines, but Nudie Jeans, a worldwide brand founded in Sweden and carrying close to 10 per cent of stock in certified organic cotton, has produced its garments in Italy since its inception and refuses to chase margins by shifting its operation to a Third World country.

Yet, despite higher production costs and sustainable practices such as eco washes made from sugar enzymes and a focus on human rights, recycling and sustainable development, Nudie’s certified organic cotton jeans are \$5 cheaper than those in its conventional range.

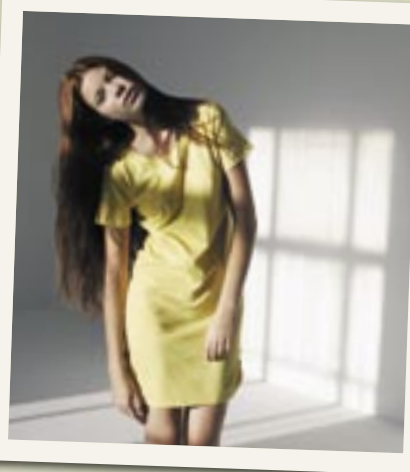
“Go back 15 years and the fashion industry didn’t want to even know about the environmental movement,” says Ha.



Top: Kelli Donovan with her Pure Pod designs. Middle: Cloth homewares use sustainable materials such as hemp and fabric remnants. Bottom: Akira Isogawa uses reclaimed materials from vintage Japanese textiles.

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in depth



Australia's inaugural green fashion parade included designs by (from left to right) Vixen, Rachael Cassar, Skin and Threads, and Bird.



"The thinking was that environmentalists were people who threw buckets of red paint on their fur parades.

"The problem is that minimising consumption (the bottom line of the eco-fashion edict being that clothes are not like disposable tissues) opposes the very core of what the industry is about.

"Therefore, I don't think the issue of sustainability will be addressed unless consumers take action by making informed decisions," says Ha. "And that doesn't mean buying two conventional T-shirts, then an extra organic one!"

IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN

If you are serious about going green, be prepared to look beyond what's revealed on labels and to ask retailers the right questions.

The Australian fashion industry does not have a sustainable standard as yet. Even companies claiming organic certification are not obliged to reveal the name of their certification body to consumers, which is a concern because standards vary considerably from country to country.

Bear in mind that fibres may be pesticide-free during the growing process but chemicals could be used during the processing of the cloth. Plus, a company's green policy may only apply to its green products as opposed being inherent within its whole structure.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) is investigating "green" marketing claims across every industry, its plan being to ramp up its green compliance activities to ensure businesses are not misleading their customers.

Meanwhile, if you want to feel secure in your eco-fashion choices, go for specialty shops such as Eco Wear, Gorman Organics and Threads of Nature in Victoria; Organic Cotton Advantage and Blessed Earth in Queensland; and brands such as Nudie Jeans, Bird Textile, Pure Pod, Sarah Victoria and Gaia Organics, which value their policies of transparency.

For more information, check out the list of designers and retailers on the Green Pages website, which has established its own sustainable standard for fashion.

■ www.greenpagesaustralia.com.au

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