

Friday, May 29, 2009

Enviro-chic gets fashionable

Clothing makers cash in on 'green' credentials

Ursula Watson / The Detroit News

What *are* you wearing? Really think about it. If you are one of the millions of people interested in becoming more environmentally friendly, you may want to take a closer look at your closet.

At times, the fashion industry seems inherently *eco-unfriendly*. Clothes are often manufactured in faraway lands under sometimes questionable working conditions and then shipped long distances by pollution-spewing conveyances. That makes the rise of "green" and "socially conscious" fashion a welcome development. But pinning down exactly what constitutes something being "green" is no simple task.

Denim woven with certified organic cotton and dyed with all-natural indigo can then be bleached with caustic chemicals. Hemp is a less energy-intensive crop than cotton, but because its cultivation is banned in the United States, it has to be imported -- which increases the carbon dioxide spewed into the atmosphere.

"There's a huge proliferation of 'eco-labels,'" says Ryan Zinn, national campaign director for the Organic Consumers Association. "Companies are starting to throw up anything (and call it green), and I think that's a big challenge. ... People are getting more and more confused as their consciousness continues to grow and evolve."

The association works toward a set of guidelines for apparel that would be as concrete as those put out by the United States Department of Agriculture for organic food, guidelines that also would take into consideration issues such as workers' rights and carbon footprints.

"Putting a logo on the label is supposed to be a kind of shorthand, but most of the ones out there are, frankly, meaningless to most consumers," says Summer Rayne Oakes. Oakes, an environmental activist, wrote the new book, "Style, Naturally," which spends 344 pages (printed with vegetable inks on recycled paper, naturally) guiding consumers to "sustainable style" options.

So how can consumers be sure what they are buying is in fact environmentally or socially conscious?

"Look behind the label and ask a lot of questions, check out their Web sites," says Bená Burda, president and founder of Maggie's Functional Organics brand of clothing and accessories. It has a warehouse in Ypsilanti and sells on its Web site and to retail stores all over the country. Products are made with USDA-certified organic cotton and wool. Maggie's also claims to be socially conscious, adhering to the standards of Fair Trade Clothing. This is a guarantee that small-scale farmers and sewers in developing countries and the United States receive a fair price for what they produce.

Michelle Billeci of Rochester knows the frustration and confusion that comes with trying to buy green. She stepped up her commitment to buying green following the birth of her son who has sensitive skin. To help others, she decided to open Green Baby, an organic clothing store for children in Rochester.

"When I purchase the products for the store I really look at different aspects," Billeci says. "I look at the inks and dyes used, are the snaps and zippers nickel-free and where was it made. I (try to) buy things made in America."

Green fashion is not new.

Outdoor clothing and gear company Patagonia, founded in 1973, has been using recyclable fabric since the early 1980s, while Simple Shoes has been making green footwear since 1991. Popular styles are made with materials like recycled tires, shoelaces made from plastic bottles, hemp, silk and environmentally certified suede and leather. Simple Shoes' factories adhere to ethical standards that shun forced and child labor and are healthy and safe work environments.

"We do our homework on the materials we put into the shoes and bags -- we don't just use whatever new 'green' material out there," says Cielo Rios, product line manager for Simple Shoes.

While buying organic products can be more expensive, there are budget-friendly ways to build a green wardrobe.

"You can reuse clothing," says Craig Minowa, Organic Consumers Association spokesman and environmental scientist. "Products go out of style and then become trendy again. There are no toxins being used and you are stopping clothing from heading to a landfill."

Shop green

There are various clothing and accessory companies that claim to be environmentally friendly and socially conscious. For information about other green products visit GreenShopper at www.greenshopper.com or Great Green Goods at www.greatgreengoods.com.

Clothing

Maggie's Functional Organics is available at Whole Foods and Plum Market stores. (800) 609-8593 or visit www.maggiesorganics.com.

Green Baby, 410 S Main St., Rochester, sells organically made baby clothes and toys. (248) 650-0700 or www.greenbabyrochester.com.

Patagonia sells outdoor wear and gear, using recycled fibers such as merino wool and fleece. It also practices corporate social responsibility by promoting fair labor and environmental protection where Patagonia is made. (800) 638.6464 or www.patagonia.com

Shoes

Simple Shoes boasts 100-percent sustainable footwear. The brand is sold in department stores such as Von Maur or Nordstrom. For information, call (866) 896.3708 or visit www.simpleshoes.com.

Accessories

Matt & Nat produces shoes, handbags and wallets using eco-fibers made from plastic water bottles. Matt & Nat accessories are available at Neiman Marcus and Nordstrom. (888) 446-2636 or www.mattandnat.com

What does it mean?

The best consumer is an educated consumer, says Craig Minowa, a spokesman and environmental scientist with the Organic Consumers Association, www.organicconsumers.org. "Really, money is power and spending a dollar is exercising power," says Minowa. "If you are going to exercise power, you need to be educated."

Here are a few eco-label terms defined; for more, visit Sustainability Dictionary at www.sustainabilitydictionary.com.

- Conflict-free is a product that can certify that it wasn't obtained through the use of violence.
- Fair trade is a system of trade where the workers receive a living wage for the goods they produce.
- Carbon-neutral is when greenhouse gas created during an item's production is then mitigated by planting trees. Think about giving back what you take.
- Upcycled is taking disposable items and transforming them into something of greater use and value. Aluminum and glass, for example, can usually be upcycled into the same quality of aluminum and glass as the original products.
- Post-consumer waste products are used by one consumer, recycled and remade into another product. Think paper that has been recycled into new paper.

Source: *Craig Minowa and the Sustainability Dictionary*

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Melanie Eady of Rochester shops at Green Baby, which sells organically made baby clothes and toys. (Clarence Tabb Jr. / The Detroit News)

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