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## ***Dress for Excess: The Cost of Our Clothing Addiction***

By Stan Cox, AlterNet. Posted November 30, 2007.

<http://www.alternet.org/environment/69256/>

This holiday season, as in many past seasons, the No. 1 gift will be clothing. That's according to a recent Consumer Reports poll. Apparently, shoppers haven't heard about another of its surveys, which found clothes to be the "most disappointing gift" of last Christmas.

Wanted or not, clothes are a more attractive deal than ever. The apparel retail industry's current philosophy is best captured in a new slogan that Wal-Mart Stores rolled out for this fall's shopping season: "Save Money. Live Better."

But in the fields and factories that feed America's colossal clothing market, living things -- including humans -- aren't doing one bit better.

### **No closet big enough**

The numbers are astonishing. Apparel is easily the second-biggest consumer sector after food. We're spending \$282 billion on new clothes annually, up from \$162 billion in 1992, based on U.S. Census figures.

Importantly, the steady upward march of clothing expenditures doesn't fully reflect the increase in the actual quantities being made and bought, because the same-size spending spree can bring in more garb with every year that goes by.

The government says apparel prices in the United States dropped by about 25 percent from 1992 to 2002, and we responded like the good consumers we are, increasing our buying by 75 percent. The population increased only 13 percent in that decade, so the average annual shopping haul, which stood at about 50 new articles of clothing per person per year in 1992, had grown to 75 or more items per person by 2002. It has only gone up since then.

And to clear out closet space for the new purchases, the average American discards 68 pounds of clothing and other textiles each year, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

The lower prices can be attributed to lower domestic wages, greater mechanization and the Wal-Mart-led corporate drive for cheaper everything. But most crucial has been the deluge of cheap imports. No. 1 among the world's top 10 apparel importers, the United States brings in more than the other nine nations combined.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture says per-person consumption of textile fiber in the United States is double that of Spain, four times that of China, and almost seven times India's. Currently, Americans

buy 40 T-shirts per household annually, 94 percent of them imported. In 2003, four new pairs of shoes were imported for each American.

You'd think that swelling sales year after year would put the industry in a festive mood. But cheap shirts and socks don't yield the satisfying profits that elegant or businesslike threads provide. Industry griping over the high-volume, low-price treadmill is only getting louder in this year's slow Christmas season.

Despite that, Americans' wardrobes keep growing, overwhelming our home storage space. Next to a small kitchen, inadequate closet space is regarded today as the biggest impediment to selling an older house. In newly built homes, a walk-in closet in every bedroom has become de rigeur. Time magazine reported earlier this year, "Master closets now average about 6 ft. by 8 ft., a size more typical of an extra bedroom 40 years ago."

Prices of the outfits that fill those closets rarely reflect the steep environmental costs of textile and apparel manufacturing. Meanwhile, the rapidly expanding organic-fiber clothing market continues losing ground to growth of conventional sales.

The worldwide annual market for organic wearables increased by \$338 million from 2001 to 2005. That growth not only failed to displace the conventional market; the increase in American consumption of conventional clothing alone, just between 2003 and 2005, outstripped four years of global growth in organic wear -- 44 times over! And the gap in material bulk is even wider than the dollar gap, because organic clothes are more expensive.

### **Naked exploitation of nature**

Although 10 million tons of unwanted duds per year puts a lot of pressure on U.S. landfills, it's in the origin of the clothes -- fiber production, manufacturing and dyeing -- that the most harm is done.

Production of synthetic fibers like nylon and polyester consumes nonrenewable resources -- primarily petroleum -- while emitting greenhouse gases like nitrous oxide and releasing toxic wastewater containing organic solvents, heavy metals, dyes, and fiber treatments. Nylon is also very difficult to recycle. Producing fiber from recycled polyester is easier and produces only 15 percent as much air pollution as using raw materials, but the product is of lower quality than virgin polyester.

Fibers made from renewable raw materials are typically no more earth-friendly than polyester. For instance, rayon is made from wood pulp coming from mature forests through a process that pumps out large quantities of air and water pollutants. (A newer wood-based fiber called lyocell has a lighter impact on the environment but is nowhere close to displacing rayon.)

As they are commonly handled, wool-producing sheep can cause soil erosion, water pollution and biodiversity loss. And wool processing often uses large volumes of chemicals to clean fibers, prevent fabric shrinkage and improve washability. Leather manufacturing, especially the tanning step, is notorious for its use of toxic chemicals, including heavy metals and nasty, organic compounds.

Then there's King Cotton. The United States produces 8.5 billion pounds of cotton fiber each year, but that fills less than a third of the nation's always expanding demand for textiles. Fully 25 percent of the world's cotton crop, in the form of lint, thread, fabric or finished products, ends up in the United States or Canada.

Cotton is grown on less than 2 percent of U.S. farmland but accounts for one of every four pounds of pesticides sprayed. Currently in the global south, estimates suggest that half of total pesticide use is on cotton.

Genetically engineered cotton that produces a caterpillar-killing toxin is being promoted as a way to reduce pesticide use. But that will be a temporary fix, as the cotton bollworm and other insects are sure eventually to develop resistance to the toxin. In India, for example, the engineered crops could lose their protection within three or four years if their acreage continues to grow.

Almost 22 billion pounds of weed killer are applied annually to U.S. cotton (pdf) -- more chemical per acre than is sprayed on soybeans and three times as much as an acre of wheat gets. To curb the soil erosion that's all too common on cotton land, "no-till" methods have been introduced on a large scale. But they require even heavier spraying of herbicides.

Even after a field has succeeded in producing a good crop, it isn't finished being sprayed: To ease harvest, defoliants are used to strip leaves from the plants.

Cotton fiber usually undergoes extensive processing even before it is spun into thread, including treatment with caustic sodium hydroxide to remove waxes. Most cotton thread or fabric is bleached to allow dyeing to the desired color. Anti-wrinkle technology can involve dangerous or even carcinogenic compounds like formaldehyde.

And all such treatments are big water users. Bleaching the cloth for a single shirt generates as much as 15 gallons of polluted wastewater.

Before being shipped off to a big factory or backroom sweatshop, most cotton thread or cloth is dyed. With the world textile industry using 10,000 different dyes and pigments, it's little wonder that environmental agencies have some difficulty keeping up with dye pollution.

Dyeing does more environmental damage than any other manufacturing step, and it's hard to hide. Villagers living near dyeing plants in southern India have reported that drinking water flowing from their taps can be red one day, green the next.

Booming demand for brightly colored cotton shirts and dresses has led to increased use of so-called "fiber reactive dyes" that bind to the cotton fiber, keeping it color-fast. Many such reactive dyes are toxic and can pass right through water-treatment facilities untouched. Some, such as azo dyes, are not easily broken down in the environment.

Dye effluents can contain any of a long list of hazardous metals: copper, cobalt, chromium, nickel, zinc, lead, antimony, silver, cadmium or mercury. Little is known about the fate or effects of chemical compounds called "auxiliaries" that are used to improve performance of the dyes.

Our top three suppliers -- China, Mexico and India -- together account for 42 percent of our clothing imports. Today, clothes and other textile products are easily the No. 1 category of imports into the United States from India and No. 2 from China, after computers. And the shift of clothing production to Asia and Latin America has shifted the chemical burden as well.

A cluster of ten textile/dyeing plants in southern India were reported this year to be dumping 7 million liters of effluent per day onto their own land, supposedly for irrigation (pdf). Having seeped into the ground, the dye pollutants and salts have rendered local groundwater unusable for actual irrigation by nearby farmers. And drinking water has to be brought into surrounding villages from outside areas that are unaffected by the dye plants.

Tests reported in 2004 showed that textile and dyeing factories in Sanganer, a city of 2 million people in northern India, have released so much polluted effluent that water from the major stream flowing through the city is actually capable of causing genetic mutations.

Meanwhile, according to a recent report (pdf), "In China, the environmental impact of textile production is especially great. Due to inferior technology, '... water consumption per unit of production is about 50 percent higher than in developed countries'. In addition, '... dye residual in wastewater is higher'... and the textile industry is one of the major contributors of industrial sewage."

Then there are the microenvironments that apparel and textile workers endure. A review of studies done worldwide up to 2003 showed that, compared with unexposed populations, textile and dye workers tend to have more nasal, throat, bladder and gastrointestinal cancers. Some cancers are more commonly associated with synthetic fabrics, others with cotton.

Hsiou-Lien Chen and Leslie Davis Burns of the Design and Human Environment Department at Oregon State University published a paper last year comparing the environmental impacts of the major classes of textile fiber. They considered all phases: the resources going into fabric; its production; dyeing, printing and finishing; use and maintenance; and disposal. Their conclusion:

Natural fibers are often associated with environmental responsibility, but ... fiber content alone may not be an accurate indicator of the full environmental cost of producing textile products ... Because of the multifaceted nature of the impact, terms like environmentally responsible or green are difficult to apply, and current usage of such terms is sometimes misleading about the real environmental qualities of textile products. Our analysis indicates that in one way or other, virtually all textile products have a negative impact on the environment.

Put another way, making a shirt -- any kind of shirt -- can never be as ecologically benign as not making a shirt.

### **The entrepreneur has no clothes**

The growing consumption of organic cotton is not a panacea. It's fine as far as it goes, but benefits are limited to curtailment of chemical use. Bale-per-acre yields tend to be lower, so feeding our cotton appetite organically would require plowing up even more acres. And cotton has a lot of other impacts that most organic production doesn't address. More than half of the irrigated agricultural land in the world is sown to cotton, and that depletes water resources and can lead to ruin of soils through salinization. Land cultivation for cotton production, which is often more intense on organic farms, is already responsible for huge losses of soil through erosion. Each acre of cotton represents a lost acre of natural ecosystem, whether it's Texas grassland or Central American forest. Damming of rivers for irrigation projects destroys even more ecosystems.

It's no wonder some have suggested, only half jokingly, that it's probably more ecologically friendly to take petroleum and turn it directly into polyester than to burn it as fuel to cultivate, fertilize, water and harvest cotton, destroying so much soil, water and biodiversity in the process.

And with no limits on total consumption, producing bigger supplies of organic clothing won't repair the damage. Even the greenest clothing companies depend for their survival on customers with overflowing closets to buy even more new stuff.

Whatever the intentions of domestic entrepreneurial companies like Gaiam, Inc. -- where, says a corporate statement, "we believe that all of the Earth's living matter, air, oceans and land form an interconnected system that can be seen as a single entity" -- or American Apparel, Inc., with its reputation for avoiding sweatshop labor, the practical result of their efforts is to add to the bulk of new material jammed into the nation's collective closet, not replace it.

Thrift stores are a less wasteful way to dress, but they account for a tiny share of total sales. Goodwill Industries saw \$1.8 billion in sales in 2006 -- a fraction of 1 percent of the market for new threads. The Salvation Army handles several hundred million garments each year, but that's only a couple of percent of new-product sales.

Most donated clothes end up being baled and shipped to impoverished countries, and that isn't necessarily doing anyone a favor. There is evidence that imports of hand-me-downs from the West undermines the ability of African nations, for example, to clothe their own populations independently of foreign charity or apparel brokers (pdf).

The only way to make a dent in the ecological impact of textile products is to slash consumption where it's now the highest. But such a trend would doubtless eat into the profits of Gaiam as well as Wal-Mart, and the supply of desirable castoffs going to thrift stores would quickly dry up.

### **License to shop**

Government economists attempting to estimate inflation by tracking the prices of identical products over time have the most trouble with the clothing portion of their standard "basket" of goods and services, because the turnover of products in apparel is the highest of any category.

But the way the current economy is structured, such constant churning is necessary. If every American suddenly started buying and keeping a wardrobe just big enough to be regarded as a necessity, not a luxury (let's say one full suitcase per person -- you pick the size of the suitcase), the retail economy would be sent reeling.

Industry has its own ideas about how to stop that from happening. Cotton Inc., the most prominent group representing that fiber -- and the industrialists, retailers and big cotton farmers that depend on it -- energetically promotes clothing consumption through its Lifestyle Monitor magazine. Last year, in a typical article on its website, entitled "Let's go shopping," the magazine revealed an expert's analysis of shopping behavior (and its condescending attitude toward women):

\* In the piece, a "fashion and lifestyle public relations" expert explains, "With higher disposable income comes more flexibility in purchasing, and we all definitely enjoy flexibility and options!"

\* But, according to Cotton Inc.'s manager of market research, it doesn't take a bigger paycheck to stimulate shopping behavior: "There are certainly women who love shopping more when they are in a tighter financial situation, since it forces them to be savvier consumers."

\* And, she adds, "Whether women admit it or not, celebrities and the media do have an influence on how many women feel about certain fashions ... When people are given the information and the tools about how to look and feel better through their wardrobe, they definitely enjoy shopping more!"

\* Whether it's "a weight loss or weight gain reflecting these positive feelings towards shopping," it's time to buy, says Cotton, Inc.: "If your body has changed, you really do need to go out and buy new clothing. It's a license to shop. and it removes any guilt you might have about spending money."

And it's all made possible by the dirt-cheap merchandise. Boston College professor Juliet Schor, author of several books on consumerism, has written:

It is now possible to buy clothing, long a high-priced and valuable commodity, by the pound, for prices comparable to cheap agricultural products such as rice and beans. This is a historically unprecedented situation. Low apparel prices have contributed to what we might term "excessive accumulation" of garments by American consumers and a move toward "disposable apparel." Excessive accumulation is characterized by high rates of discard, low rates of utilization of existing inventories of garments, rapid fashion cycles and a failure to wear garments through their useful life cycles. Excessive accumulation has been exacerbated by rapid economic growth in the 1990s and the continuing decline of apparel prices. (pdf)

Cheap clothes are widely viewed as giving a boost to working Americans because, in the words of Wal-Mart CEO Lee Scott, "Our customers simply don't have the money to buy basic necessities between paychecks." But Schor points out that "maintaining a regime of ecologically, unsustainable, but low prices in order to sustain purchasing power for the poor solves a problem for a subset of the population but reproduces another one for the entire planet."

With clothing, good marketing can easily undermine education and exhortation. One university study found that people who have good knowledge of apparel's environmental costs are not any more likely to practice "environmentally responsible consumption" than those who are unaware of the problem. Even clothes boasting a "Made in USA" label don't seem able to overcome their price disadvantage. Recent surveys (pdf) projected that advertisements highlighting the domestic origin of nonimported clothing would not have much influence on shoppers.

So the bought-and-forgotten clothes keep piling up, and nobody (outside the closet-remodeling industry) seems happy: not the holiday shoppers, not the gift recipients, not the image consultants, not the corporate bean counters, not the textile and apparel workers, not the cotton farmers of Asia and

Africa, and least of all Mother Nature.

All in all, the "Save Money, Live Better" strategy is starting to look a little threadbare.

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