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Shades of Green: Decoding Eco Fashion's Claims

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For those who want to look chic while saving the planet, there are more green fashion choices now than ever before. The trouble is it's hard to figure out which clothing really makes a difference.

Though everyone from Barneys to Target sells clothes that claim to be green, there's no one standard for Earth-friendliness. "There are standards for growing organic cotton or for parts of the process but not for the total garment," says Sass Brown, an assistant professor at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology who specializes in sustainability in fashion.

What are shoppers to do? Should they favor an apparel maker like Timberland, which takes steps to reduce its carbon footprint, including using recycled materials and planting trees? Or a company that produces goods locally, so they don't have to be shipped? Or an outfit like pop star Bono's Edun that tries to ease poverty by making garments in Africa?

Are fabrics made of organic cotton, bamboo or seaweed intrinsically better than other materials? What about the rest of the manufacturing process -- everything from how the raw material is processed to how it is dyed, treated and sewn? The answers suggest that even the most environmentally committed designers and manufacturers at times must make trade-offs.

RECYCLED MATERIALS



Ericka Burchett/WSJ

Who's Doing It: Bagir, Patagonia, Timberland, Coca-Cola T-shirts


The Claim: Use of recycled materials saves energy, reduces carbon-dioxide emissions and keeps waste out of landfills. Bagir uses recycled plastic bottles to make ECOGIR men's suits; Patagonia does the same for outdoor clothing. Timberland's "Earthkeepers" boots, sold in recycled cardboard boxes, have soles made of 30% recycled rubber and linings made of 70% recycled material. Wal-Mart sells T-shirts made from cotton

blended with recycled plastic from Coca-Cola bottles.

The Trade-Off: Many companies don't use 100% recycled materials. Instead, they blend it with other materials to make a final garment softer or otherwise enhance performance. Percentages vary.

Bottom Line: Any use of recycled materials is generally a positive, because recycled material requires less energy to process than natural fibers.

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BAMBOO



Ericka Burchett/WSJ

Who's Doing It: Linda Loudermilk, Lara Miller, Bamboosa.

The Claim: Bamboo grows rapidly, with little water and no pesticides. It can be harvested every three to four years, and it breaks down in landfills.

The Trade-Off: It takes harsh chemicals and lots of energy to turn stiff bamboo stalks into fibers that can be woven into silky fabrics. "It's not a chemical-free fiber," says Peter Hauser, a professor of textile chemistry at North Carolina State University.

Bottom Line: Though some environmentalists say bamboo is preferable to synthetics and conventional cotton, the use of chemicals in bamboo processing isn't very environmentally friendly, Dr. Hauser says.

FAIR TRADE/HELPING DEVELOPING COUNTRIES



Ericka Burchett/WSJ

Who's Doing It: Edun, Fair Indigo and Swati Argade

The Claim: Manufacturing in Africa, India and Peru helps develop skills of workers in developing economies.

The Trade-Off: Remote production requires long-distance shipping and thus more CO2 emissions, says F.I.T.'s Prof. Brown. Edun CEO Christian Kemp-Griffin says the company is trying to minimize shipping during the manufacturing process. For example, it now produces garments from start to finish in Uganda.

Bottom Line: If you sell to a global market, it's impossible to work with local communities in disadvantaged regions and also have a small carbon footprint, Ms. Brown says.

CRUELTY FREE WOOL



Alamy

Who's Doing It: Fast-fashion retailer H designer brands Hugo Boss and Perry Ellis

The Claim: People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals wants apparel makers to boycott merino wool produced in Australia by sheep farmers who ward off flesh-eating flies by cutting out patches of the animals' skin -- a practice the farmers have agreed to stop by the end of 2010.

The Trade-Off: Until someone comes up with a better alternative, the farmers say they must cut the animals to treat a life-threatening condition. H&M says it is determining where else it can buy merino wool; most of the world's supply comes from Australia.

Bottom Line: If this practice bothers you, stay away from merino wool for now.

ORGANIC COTTON



Ericka Burchett/WSJ

Who's Doing It: Loomstate, eco from Levi Strauss, Nike, Rogan at Target, Wal-Mart, Stella McCartney

The Claim: Because it's grown without pesticides, organic cotton is considered preferable to the conventional kind.

The Trade-Off: Certified organic cotton is in short supply, representing less than 1% of total production. Some companies use just a tiny percentage of it in their garments or use uncertified organics, says Mark Messura, a Cotton Inc. executive vice president. To be certified organic, cotton must grow in soil that has been chemical free for three years, the U.S. Agriculture Department says. Dyes used to color the fabric may contain toxic substances, though.

Bottom Line: Ask manufacturers, or check their Web sites, to see if their cotton is certified organic, what portion of it is organic and what kind of dye was used. The label won't necessarily say.

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