

You've probably heard about wearing hemp (everyone wore it in the old days), but what about bamboo designer gear? Is it just the latest in idiotic fashions or is it a sign of the times and changing priorities? Chris Erasmus takes a closer look at this trend.

Cool clothi

So sustainability has hit the fashion ramp and will be on show at the Natural & Organic Products Exhibition in late October in the form of ranges made from various natural fibres such as cotton, hemp and even bamboo. We all know that really good cotton makes fantastic clothing, cool in summer and warm in winter, as well as the most luxurious of bedding. But what about hemp or bamboo?

We've spoken about hemp in this publication before. It is one of the fastest-growing renewable natural fibres out there and is responsible in many respects for our modern world, having provided a vast range of products in the pre- and early-industrial eras when man-made fabrics and fibres were still to be invented. Back then, everyone wore linen, cotton, wool or hemp – the Afrikaans word for a shirt being derived from the name of the plant fibre from which almost all workmen's shirts were woven. Without hemp there wouldn't have been an era of sail (ropes and sailcloth both being made from this plant's particularly sturdy and sea-resistant long-strand fibres), and therefore our modern industrial era would have, at the least, been much-delayed.

So going back to hemp in the 21st century makes an enormous amount of sense, providing from a single plant a huge range of products,

Conscious Industries

For many people the word hemp conjures up negative feelings associated with drug use and counter-culture activities. What is not realised is that this association is the result of dogma that has been fed to us over the past century and that industrial hemp is actually very beneficial both to humanity and the planet. Tony Budden reports.

For thousands of years hemp was one of the primary crops grown by man for fibre and nutrition. Its use can be found and tracked in nearly every culture and civilisation where it was utilised for clothing, sails, ropes, oil, lighting fuel, food and paper. Its history is extensive.

Then in 1937, at a time when synthetic fibres and pesticide-needy cotton were gaining popularity, a concerted propaganda campaign was run by the Hearst paper corporation, DuPont (recent introducers of Nylon) and others against their competition, hemp. They did this by using marijuana, the psychoactive cousin of industrial hemp. The US congress succumbed to this propaganda and banned the entire cannabis plant including all its legitimate uses. Even the semantics of calling hemp 'marijuana', a Mexican word, was using racial prejudices to help get the plant criminalised. The ban remained in effect until 1942 when the US entered World War II and there was a sudden need for fibre for ropes and uniforms. The ban was lifted, with the US Navy even producing a short film entitled 'Hemp for Victory'. After the war ended hemp was again outlawed and remains so today. Is this another case of big industry preventing us from using safe and natural alternatives?

Fortunately things are changing and there are now over 30 industrialised nations that have legitimate hemp industries. The US is still the main country that maintains the ban, but even there we are seeing developments with a bill that would allow for industrial hemp to be grown in California awaiting approval on Governor Arni Schwarzenegger's desk. We will see if hemp can do the ultimate 'I'll be back'. Here in SA we have had industrial hemp trials for the past 10 years. There are several exciting projects underway that could jump-start the industry as soon as we have worked through the legislative issues. The fears of the government that hemp fields would be used to hide cannabis are completely unfounded. Most industrial hemp strains have a THC content of less than 0.3%, while cannabis typically has between 5% and 15% THC content in the flowering heads. Industrial hemp has absolutely no value as a psychoactive drug, and law enforcement can be trained to recognise the difference between it and the narcotic variety by sight.

Hemp is grown very differently to cannabis. Fibre strains are planted very close together causing competition for light and leading to long thin plants up to 4m high. The prized fibres are found in the stalk. Hemp grown for seed will have male plants



Natural fibres prove popular on the runway.



from fuels and oils to high-tech derivatives, additives and other complex compounds that have mostly been made from fossil fuels, through to building materials (hemp bricks, which are sturdy, light, weather-resistant and attractive), interior design features from furniture to fabric finishes, and, of course, clothing. On top of all its positive features, hemp has the capacity to provide a paper alternative to wood at something between four and 10 times faster than it takes to grow that same wood which is pulped to make paper. And all this while providing much-needed jobs. There's a development scheme using hemp underway in the Eastern Cape, and another in Stellenbosch, but the full potential of this product is far from being fully explored, partly because many people confuse hemp with its intoxicating cousin plant cannabis – but that's another story.

There's really no need to wax lyrical or any other way about the wonders of silk, wool, cotton or linen (which is made from flax fibre), but bamboo as a clothing fibre is indeed something new, at least in the West. At first blush, as someone who grew up with a bamboo patch in the garden, my reaction to this idea was that the stuff isn't that human-friendly. Obviously, bamboo can be used for a range of things, from buildings themselves to scaffolding (they still use it on high-rises in China, amazingly) and for decorative purposes. And one can eat bamboo shoots, which both pandas and many humans agree are delicious. But given those nasty little hairs that grow on the stems and which, like caterpillar hairs, cause extreme allergic discomfort, I wasn't too convinced about bamboo clothing.

So why bamboo? Well, here are some of this amazing plant's benefits when used (as it has been for much longer than people realise) as a fibre in clothing: it's incredibly soft and silk-like, feeling smooth and luxurious on the skin (I'm looking forward to trying it), it absorbs and evaporates sweat very quickly, so it doesn't stick to the skin and keeps one much more comfortable in humid and hot climates, with the fibres staying some 2° cooler in hot weather but also staying warmer in cool weather. A unique property is that bamboo is claimed to be powerfully antibacterial, thereby staying fresher for longer and improving the hygiene and the health of the wearer. Then, of course, bamboo doesn't need fertiliser or any of that to grow and is 100% sustainable, and 100% biodegradable. In the rapid growing stakes it's even faster than hemp, being the fastest growing plant in the vegetable kingdom, even improving soil quality in areas where it is grown. It is also extremely efficient at taking up carbon and converting into its own fibres, so wearing bamboo clothing is a direct way to reduce global warming. One could hardly imagine a more eco-friendly product. Actually, the more I write about it, the more I want to try it out.

As to silk, cotton and the other 'traditional' natural fibres, there is a world-wide swing back to their use in both day-to-day wear and high fashion, driven in part by the usual 'swings-and-roundabouts' business of fashion trends, but more so by the growing awareness that in general these fabrics feel better, wear better and are better for the planet as a whole by virtue of their lower overall impact from growing and harvesting through production and re-use or recycling.

So 'No K*K' is really about just that because, in the end, holistic living is about using what the earth provides in a sustainable way. ○

present in the field and flowers that are bursting full of seed at harvest time. Cannabis is grown in short bushy plants to maximise flowering head growth, and the male plants are eradicated as the seed is not wanted. So just using sight anyone can be trained to identify what the intended use of the crop is. Using a hemp field to hide cannabis plants is also not a good idea as the low THC hemp will cross-pollinate with the cannabis and make it worthless as a drug. Most importantly, hemp will be run on a licensing system. No illegal cannabis grower will ever declare his name, address and location of his crop to the authorities, no matter how well he thinks he could disguise it.

In South Africa we face unique challenges and for the hemp industry to succeed we would need to make it accessible to the emerging farmer. To do this we need to ensure that they have access to seeds, farming and harvesting equipment, processing machinery and markets. To meet this challenge, the concept of Sustainable Integrated Village in Agro-economy, or SIVA, has been developed.

These SIVAs will be positioned around the country, with a pilot project already being developed in Sir Lowry's Pass village. They will be centres for training, seed distribution, equipment and machinery stores and will be responsible for managing the farmers in the area. It is only through this system that a hemp industry will become a success locally and be able to reach its full potential in providing jobs, housing, nutrition and more.

One exciting development is the 'Grow your own House' project. Once the primary product of hemp, the fibre, has been removed, the stalk or 'hurds' remain. These are very high in cellulose, and when ground up and mixed with ash and lime, a natural cement is formed. The French have been instrumental in developing this technology, and there have been over 5 000 houses built in France using it. The chipped stalk and lime mix can also be cast into bricks which hold the same amount of pressure as clay bricks, but are seven times lighter. Hemp fibre can also be woven into insulation/isolation mats that are an environmentally friendly alternative to the fibre-glass insulation currently used in most houses.

Another way hemp can make a marked difference in the quality of life for many of our citizens is as a nutritional supplement. Hemp seed is high in the protein globulin edistin, which is a very easily digestible protein and can be of great benefit to people with nutrition blocking diseases such as HIV and TB. Add to this the fact that hemp seed oil is one of the few plant sources that contain Omega 3, 6 and 9 in perfect ratios for our body, as well as all the essential amino acids. Essential fatty acids also help boost the immune system and assist the brain in absorbing protein. Hemp seeds are not psychoactive.

The hemp plant is incredibly versatile and can produce an estimated 25 000 end products. Any products that will be made locally will require a labour force on the farms and factories to manufacture them. In this way hemp can help alleviate poverty and provide many sustainable jobs as well as benefiting the environment as it is very easy to grow hemp organically. Hemp projects can also qualify for the Carbon Credit System. The government is catching on, and we are slowly gaining the support of some departments. At the moment the current situation of the permits being controlled by the Department of Health is still very much holding the industry back. The permits required are to do research on a narcotic drug, even though industrial hemp has been internationally recognised as non-narcotic.

Adopting conscious industries such as hemp and the broader organic market will indeed help us in our move back towards a greener, healthier planet. ○ Visit www.hemporium.com for more info



3

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From top, left column: Natural cosmetics • plant fibre serves a variety of uses • Bamboo – dried and ready for processing. Hemp: clothing & accessories; a brick for building; seed, a rich source of minerals.