



# ETHICAL

From rock stars to the red-carpet runway, going green is the new black. Hybrid cars, alternative electricity and eco-eventing, it seems the environmental age is upon us and not a moment too soon. Charlize Theron, Leonardo DiCaprio, Woody Harrelson and Cameron Diaz are just a few among the celebrity icons using the limelight for pro-action. Spreading the word that it is up to all of us to make changes in the way we use our planet's resources and setting the trend, they're doing it in style – Eco-style. Tony Budden and Kama Murray report.

**T**he concept of introducing responsibility and consciousness into the fashion industry is a relatively new one. Since the advent of consumerism and global trade, the history of the industry is marked with horror stories. Stories of slave labour in the 19<sup>th</sup> century cotton fields, abuse of animals in the fur and leather trade,

sweat-shops pervading much of the Third World and environmental degradation destroying our very bio-sphere. Stories that seldom make it to the high street boutiques and which are simply never printed on the hand-wash only designer labels.

Fashion is a temporary and dynamic phenomenon driven by the



From left: The 'No Kak' Fashion Show at the Natural & Organic Products Exhibition. **'Green Leaf'** – Designed by Serena Moodley. Hemp silk blend used to design the tunic piece, decorated with dried banana leaves; the pants are made from green hemp summer cloth, decorated with turmeric dyed cut-out leaves. **'African Winter Gardener'** – Designed by Tarien Malherbe. The dress is made from hemp summer cloth and dyed with beetroot to various intensities. Tree bark and leaves were used to accessories the garment. Arm and leg coverings are made with pure spun sheep's wool, dyed in red wine and coffee. **'Handmade'** – Dress designed by Sabrina Rupprecht, 1<sup>st</sup> place winner 2007. The garment is made using felted wool and all decorative buttons are self-made from clay. The garment is partially dyed using rooibos to give a beige colour to the wool. **'Global Warming'** – Designed by Zenzile Innocentia Msiza. The hemp summer cloth garment is dyed using beetroot and beaded with beans. **'Daisy Chain'** – Dress designed by Kerys Bagg. This three-piece outfit uses organic cotton and accessorised using beetroot-dyed mohair. The fabric brooch is made from scraps of recycled waste material.

# CLOTHING

Fashion Photos: Gilles Ridley

ruthless monster of media, so it is hard to imagine that something based in the realm of the ego could even begin to take an ethical turn but, times are changing and with the rise in awareness of environmental issues such as global warming and an increase in social responsibility, we have seen new ways of being emerging, including the demand for organic products. It seems only fitting that the very core of the consumer industry change with the times.

So, how can fashion be considered ethical?

It's really quite simple, Conscious Clothing. Now I don't mean that pair of socks that comes to life after the fourth day of 'wear and no wash'; conscious clothing means garments produced and marketed with consideration for the planet and those that live on it. In other words, fashion that doesn't cost the world.

From the farms to the factories and into the stores, there are many factors which must be taken into account if a garment is to be considered 'conscious' or 'ethical'. This includes: the fibre from which the fabric was made and how that fibre was obtained, the

process by which the fabric was produced, the working conditions and remuneration of the farmers and factory staff, the distance from factory to shop shelf and the durability of the garment itself.

## MORAL FIBRE

Besides being environmentally friendly, organic fibres have a host of other benefits. Here's a look at some of them.

### Hemp

Historically hemp is believed to be the first plant cultivated by man for fibre, and, for thousands of years it provided the vast majority of the world's textile needs. Industrial hemp refers to the fibre, seeds and stalk of the *Cannabis Sativa* plant. Unfortunately, it is illegal to grow industrial hemp in South Africa due to the refusal of the government to recognise the differences that set it apart from its narcotic cousin, dagga. However, there is lobby for changing

this situation as, internationally, over 30 countries are now taking advantage of all that this incredibly diverse plant has to offer. Job-creation, housing and nutritional problems are but a few of the challenges that would certainly be alleviated were South Africa to follow suit.

It is easy to grow, needing little to none of the pesticides or agrochemicals commonly used on conventionally-grown cotton crops. In comparison with cotton, it yields more fibre per hectare, is less water intensive, has three times the tensile strength (making it more durable) and, being hollow, is odour and mould resistant. Like many of the other organic textiles, it is a great insulator and more absorbent than those made by man.

Due to its versatility, hemp makes for a wonderful fabric for designers to work with which, to the consumer, means availability and options. Hemp clothing is readily available online and at retail outlets around the country.

## Cotton

Cotton provides for nearly half of the world's textile needs, but at a cost. The cotton industry uses around 25% of the world's pesticides and insecticides and is very water intensive. In the US, it has been shown that states where cotton is grown have a much higher incidence of cancer, and chlorpyrifos – used in West African cotton – causes brain and fetal damage, impotence and sterility. (Source: Pesticide Action Network UK).

Organic cotton, which is grown using only natural fertilisers, pesticides and phosphates, is on the rise but at the moment demand far exceeds supply. Cotton is susceptible to attacks by pest and it is fairly difficult to grow organically which in the long run also means it costs more. In South Africa there is a move to grow organic cotton, piloted by Woolworths, which will hopefully motivate more farmers to go organic. Africa is currently the world's fourth largest producer of organic cotton. When shopping for organic cotton, look out for reputable certification such as Fair Trade. Visit your local Woolworths for menswear, womenswear and kidswear, and look out for their newly launched 'our green label'.

## Bamboo

Textiles made from the fast-growing bamboo plant are becoming increasingly popular although there is a fairly chemically-intensive process involved in order to get the fibres to textile grade.

It is a very easy plant to grow organically and sustainably,

producing 35% more oxygen and absorbing five times the amount of carbon dioxide to that of a regular stand of trees. However the challenge lies in its invasiveness while growing, and once it has been introduced to an area, it is very difficult to eradicate.

Bamboo fabric is prized for its drape, natural sheen and softness, similar to silk but far more durable. It is incredibly absorbent and wicks moisture away from the body four times faster than cotton, but thanks to the anti-bacterial agents, it resists harbouring odours, leaving the wearer drier and odour free. It is hypo-allergenic which is great for those with sensitive skin, but unfortunately this depends on the amount of chemicals used in production. Shrinking during washing and drying is minimal at warm temperatures.

When purchasing bamboo clothing, look for certification from independent but reliable certification companies such as KRAV and Oeko-Tex.

## Organic Wool

In order for wool to be organic, the sheep need to be raised under healthy natural conditions and environmentally responsible methods which take into account the soil, air, waterways and naturally-occurring predators.

The land they graze needs to be free from toxic herbicides and pesticides and must not be over-grazed. The wool yarn must at no point be chemically treated. The raw wool must be scoured clean in a biodegradable cleansing agent and spun at an organic mill. Organic wool is hypo-allergenic, unlike conventionally-produced wool which causes sensitivity due to the chemicals used and retained in the finished product.

## Raw & Organic Silk

Conventional silk is not ethical as the cocoons are boiled before the moth emerges and in order to get one kilogram of silk, four to five thousand silkworms must die.

Wild silk is silk produced from cocoons that are harvested once the moth has already emerged, but are often slightly discoloured due to the alkaline secreted by the emerging moth and sometimes due to the different food source of the worms.

It creates a wonderful warm and soft fabric with a lovely sheen, best worn directly against the skin. It is extremely comfortable and is ideal for sensitive skin types.

Silk is light and has great thermo-regulating properties.

In South Africa Wild Kalahari or African Wild Silk is becoming

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available, made from the cocoon of the mopani worm.

This product began by default as farmers had to collect cocoons from trees as their livestock were eating them and becoming ill because they could not digest them. After a while the collected cocoons were recognised as a resource on their own and this beautiful fabric emerged.

This process is very environmentally friendly and ethical and is mostly being produced in empowerment-based projects.

There are other natural fibres that are regaining popularity such as flax (linen), soya and even nettle.

It is important that the move away from synthetic fibres, which result in much pollution and are very energy-intensive to produce, towards natural fibres, is coupled with sustainable and organic agricultural practices in order to see the environmental benefits this move can bring.

## FAIR TRADE

The global fashion trade is a trillion dollar industry, but very little of this fortune ever gets to the people that make the clothing or the farmers that grow the plants for the fibre to make the textiles.

Throughout the Third World there are factories churning out garments for international fashion brands where workers are paid a pittance and often have to work in inhumane conditions, crowded together and exposed to chemicals while working excessively long hours. These 'sweatshops' are the part of the industry that is hidden from the consumer's eyes; there are few of us that would actually acknowledge that we are happy about someone having to endure a life like that just so we can buy cheap clothing.

Fair Trade is a concept that has arisen in the last few years where factories ensure that their workers are paid a living wage, that work conditions are safe, that children are not used as labour and that the staff are not working excessive hours. It also covers the safety and working conditions of the farmers who supply the factories and ensures that the farming communities are not exploited.

## BUYING LOCAL

Global trade has made it likely that any garment can have components from several different countries. For example, a pair of jeans sold in Europe may have been made in China from cotton grown in India that was woven in Bangladesh and using buttons from Thailand.

All this transport of components contributes to pollution and global warming from the emissions of the trucks and ships or planes that move these goods around the planet.

It makes better environmental sense to support labels that source their fabrics and labour close to where the garments are sold, thereby decreasing the environmental footprint of the clothing you wear, and helping to stimulate your local economy.

## BEING ETHICAL

Ethics are very personal and subjective, and it is important that as conscious human beings we develop a sense of the impact our demands place on the planet. There is no such thing as a

## Why Silk Works

Silk has been the fabric of choice for millennia for royalty, aristocrats, and anyone else who could afford it, for good reason. Putting aside the issues of how silk may be harvested ethically (see main story for details), fabrics made of silk have very special properties that make them not only extravagantly refined in feel and on the skin, but also healthier than man-made fabrics. These days, one can get a wide range of products made of silk – and you don't have to be of blue-blood to be able to enjoy it.

Silk bedding, for example, is considered especially luxurious, since it works so well against the skin (keeps you warm in winter and cool in summer – partially attributed to the fact that silk draws moisture away from the body), reduces the incidence of dust mites, is hypo-allergenic and is said to induce a superior sleep experience. Silk duvets are made using thousands of double cocoons. Ethical silk producers stretch the cocoon, rather than unravel it, thereby respecting the life of the silkworm, as there is actually no need to first kill the worm in order to ensure that the silk strand is not broken. The cocoons are layered one upon the next to create a duvet. The cohesive unit is then sewn into a cotton percale casing. There is no dyeing or chemicals used in the process, making it environmentally friendly. Silk also contains homeopathic properties and has been reported to reduce vascular sclerosis.



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Above, from top: Leonard DiCaprio, a pro-active film star; Naturally dyed fibre using Buckthorn bark; Bamboo as a fibre – increasingly popular, 'but requires a fairly chemical intensive process'; The KRAV logo – 'an independent and reliable' certification company for bamboo textile – and the Fairtrade label which 'guarantees a better deal for 3<sup>rd</sup> World producers'.



A polyphemus caterpillar – ethical silk should take the life of the caterpillar into account in silk cocoon production.

It makes better environmental sense to support labels that source their fabrics and labour close to where the garments are sold, thereby decreasing the environmental footprint of the clothing you wear, and helping to stimulate your local economy.

'cheap' product. Seeking out bargains and paying less than something is actually worth perpetuates the system of abuse and environmental degradation. If something is 'cheap' it is more than likely that someone else is paying the cost for you and that the environment is being abused in order to get it to you at that price. Cheap disposable fashion is responsible for much damage to our planet and is keeping many people in virtual slavery.

- Support your local manufacturers and insist on organic fabrics where possible. Avoid energy-intensive and polluting synthetics.
- Recycle your clothing by donating them to the needy when you no longer feel comfortable wearing them.
- Choose timeless fashions instead of buying clothing that you know will only be fashionable while the trend lasts.

It is crucial that ethical fashion and conscious consumerism becomes more than a trend and more of a sustainable lifestyle choice.

At the moment we are seeing many top designers becoming involved and at the recent Future Fashion show at the New York Fashion Week, there were some incredibly beautiful and fashionable garments made by some of the world's top names and utilising the ethics mentioned above. South African designer, Craig Jacobs, creator and founder of Funduzi fashion label made his debut on the Paris catwalk last year, with beautifully-designed and 100% organic clothing.

The consumer has the power in the way they spend. We need to be responsible with what we spend our money on and who we support. It is up to us all to make changes, as only then will we see the planet move back towards the healthy green world it was always intended to be. □

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