

ECO-FRIENDLY FOCUS

Brands look to go green without sacrificing performance. **By Eric Smith**

When they launched Niche Snowboards in 2009 in Salt Lake City, co-founders Ana Van Pelt, Todd Robertson and Kirsten Kolter had a clear vision for the company: make a high-performance board without harming the environment.

“At the time, no one was really focusing on the fact that snowboarding manufacturing is quite toxic,” Van Pelt said. “We wanted to be the first and only company that was entirely focused on making sustainable and environmentally friendly snowboards.”

The company has more than lived up to its lofty mission, using bio resins instead of traditional resins, avoiding lacquer on top sheets and sourcing 98 percent of materials locally around its factory in Austria.

Niche’s Theme is a zero-waste production snowboard whose leftover materials are upcycled into products such as goggle frames and surfboard fins. But Van Pelt is quick to note that just because a product is green, it doesn’t have to sacrifice performance or durability.

“All that stuff is good for the environment, but it also makes the boards lighter and more durable,” she said. “They’re super snappy and responsive and have a distinctly supple feeling underfoot.”

Plenty of snow sports manufacturers are developing and marketing environmentally friendly products, many of which are on display at the Show. Bern Unlimited Inc. partnered with PLUSfoam to make a goggle that not only uses recycled material but is itself recyclable. However, Bern also is aware of the need to develop products that do more than simply reduce waste.

“The benefit to the customer is it’s half the weight of a

TPU (thermoplastic polyurethane) frame, which is what all the other goggles are made of,” said Bern Founder and CEO Dennis Leedom.

Scarpa North America’s T2 Eco and T1 telemark boots are among the few the company manufactures with Pebax Rnew, a plastic substitute made from castor oil instead of petroleum. “We are making ski boots out of plants,” says CEO Kim Miller. “I can’t understand why we’re not all using Pebax Rnew. Of course, part of the reason is it’s more expensive, and a lot of what we deal with are environmental decisions vs. economic decisions. It’s a really unfortunate kind of juxtaposition.”

But as more customers — and more retailers, Miller emphasized — demand eco-friendly, the economic balance will shift and more brands can make them.

Nadene Wisely, head of product/snow softgoods for Quiksilver and Roxy, has seen demand for green products rise on the softgoods side. Both brands use Repreve fabric yarns in about a third of their products for shell fabrics, recycled fabric linings and trims, and they also use more water-based inks. The company estimates these efforts equaled 11 million recycled plastic bottles during the last season. “It’s something we hope to improve on each year,” Wisely said.

Raw material suppliers also are becoming more conscious of green demands. K&K Clothing Accessories Co., which has a booth in the Sourcing Snow area of the Show, is in the process of attaining bluesign certification, which promotes sustainable textile production. “If you don’t have bluesign, you can’t work with the big brands,” said sales rep Judy Loh. ●



▲ NICHE SNOWBOARDS THEME



▲ SCARPA T1 TELEMARK BOOT