

The Sustainable Way

Fashion has always been a way of life---using the human body as a canvas on to which it can express itself and transitioning through various evolutions, but these “evolutions” have come with a grim price--- a price that has drastically affected the planet which human life inhabits. The human senses are bombarded every second with marketers pushing their innuendos like a drug-dealer to an addict, tricking us into believing the illusion that we need more than what we have. We have become “the consumer”, and as a result of our over-consumption, whole eco-systems are being destroyed and the air is no longer safe for us to breathe in due to all the pollution being pumped into it to create the latest fashions. According to the studies of the EPA Office of Solid Waste, Americans throw away more than 68 pounds of clothing and textiles per year, and this figure is rapidly growing.

With the reputation of “Human Wasteland” looming over our heads, one has to consider better methods of becoming less wasteful and preserving our natural resources while the earth is still giving us a chance to. This is where sustainability makes its grand appearance. While being truly sustainable continues to be a huge challenge in the fashion industry, there are companies who are adopting it into their business practices and following the sustainability creed of using resources in a way that does not impoverish the planet for the next generation. The clothing company *Nau* and the non-profit organization *Greenheart Shop* are leading by example, but there are still some companies, despite their efforts, that are still contributing to the demise of our home planet by using fast fashion as a means of profit, such as H&M. Let’s explore the dynamics of each of these companies and how they are trying to resolve the issues surrounding environmental stress.

Nau (pronounced “now”) is a clothing company based in Portland, Oregon that makes sustainable urban and outdoor apparel. This company consists of less than 20 people who are enthusiastically active outdoors, and passionate about creating a business that is an extension of who they are and how they live. Their objective is to redesign fashion and to redefine the business so that each becomes a powerful inspiration for change. Creating sustainable fashion means being less of a drain on natural resources, but this company matches that creed with creating timeless colors, using eco-friendly materials and simple care, and creating styles that withstand the fickleness of fast fashion and last for more than one season.

Nau's principle of design is about creating beauty, performance, and sustainability in their products, and combining the elements of people and planet with profit to create a balance. This company doesn't make it the government's responsibility to enforce strict laws to ensure that they are following ethical guidelines---for ethical practices are the aesthetic this company lives by. By making sure that the companies they are partnering with are adhering to their “Code of Conduct”, which involves providing a safe work environment for their employees and implementing a system to minimize or eliminate negative impacts on the environment, they are paving the way to the birth of more clothing companies that will adopt sustainability as a lifestyle and a business. Waxed organic cotton, waterproof wool, and yak fiber are just some of the materials that are sourced and incorporated into their designs. CEO, Gordon Seabury, says, “We need to make this vision reality...failure or compromise is not an option.” One thing is for certain, with more than 130 retail storefronts in North America, Switzerland, and Japan---*Nau* is decreasing the impact on the environment and carving an exciting path on the journey to sustainable fashion.

Another company that falls in line with the practice of sustainable fashion is the non-profit organization *Greenheart Shop*. *Greenheart Shop* is based out

of Chicago, IL and follows the principles of fair trade. Consumers find it difficult to feel any connection to the way the everyday products they are using are produced. To get a clear understanding of fair trade, one must ask themselves, “What conditions did the workers work in?” “Was their labor forced?” “Were my clothes made by children?” These questions represent what it means to be an advocate for fair trade—and this is the core of *Greenheart Shop’s* aesthetic. This company follows the principles of fair trade by guaranteeing producers a living wage for their work, building long term relationships between producers and buyers, engaging in environmentally sustainable practices, empowering women and providing equal opportunities for the disadvantaged, and providing healthy and safe working environments.

This company carries a variety of products made by artisans from all over the world including recycled accessories and handbags, kitchen goods, home décor, gourmet treats, cookbooks, cruelty-free leather, boutique jewelry, and much more, but *Greenheart* is not just involved in locally introducing fair trade and sustainable fashion, but globally. This organization is very much involved in the community, hosting events at the store and giving international students and Americans traveling abroad the chance to volunteer on environmental and social projects in over 13 countries. *Greenheart Shop* is not just about selling products that are made using the most sustainable materials and methods---but this company is about providing the public with cultural understanding, environmental consciousness, and world peace.

But not all clothing companies share the passion of increasing their “green” footprint and lessening the effects that fashion production has had on the environment. *H&M* is among those companies. This Swedish retail-clothing company is among the clique of fast fashion retailers (*Zara, Forever 21, Topshop*) whose carbon footprint is deeply imprinted in the environment. They follow fast fashion’s creed of “buy it now” mentality, with production outsourced to approximately 800

factories in Europe and Asia—2,300 stores in 41 countries. Although this company has taken positive steps to adopt more sustainable practices, such as introducing an eco-friendly spring line, April 14, 2011, using “earth loving” materials like organic cotton and recycled polyester, they’re efforts are still questionable. Fast fashion’s “here today, gone tomorrow” mindset still has a negative effect on the environment, no matter how profitable or good the intentions. It’s respectable that this company has sought to repair its environmental credentials after being caught destroying new, unsold garments in January of 2010, but it leads one to question---how genuine are they’re efforts if at the heart of any fast fashion retailer is speed?

It is a tangled web we weave—to be fashionable and respectable of the issues that are plaguing the environment everyday. I believe that there are always good intentions—but these good intentions are detoured by the egotistical messages fed to the mind everyday—to consume the more and consume the best. Yet this way of living has left a pollution footprint—each clothing life cycle generating more and more environmental hazards. *Gau* and *Greenheart Shop* are certainly inspirational towards the future of sustainable fashion, but companies like *H&M* and its comrade’s makes one question—will this business practice become something that *can* be sustained? Or will it become a fad of yesterday—fading just as quickly as it came? As consumers, we do have a choice. We can choose to improve the lives of the people we inhabit this planet with and make a positive impact on the earth—or we can turn what was once a paradise into a wasteland and leave it for the future generations to clean up. But hey—at least we’ll be impeccably dressed.