



# Going Green

Most people have an idea of what green fashion looks like. But for many still, it usually conjures an image of hippie frocks and burlap sacks. Well thankfully this is no longer the case. Sustainable, ethical fashion has come a very long way in recent years. So much so, that it is just as much about the fashion and design as it is about the fact that it is “green”. It’s the story behind the garment where one learns that it is sustainable.

And so what exactly is sustainable or eco fashion anyway? Most people equate it with clothing made from fabrics such as hemp, organic cotton, organic wool, recycled polyester, bamboo, and tencel. However second-hand and vintage clothing, or re-working an old garment into something new, is also very sustainable because it saves the clothing from its usual end of life destination – landfill.

For those in the business of fashion, it’s extremely important to understand that this industry has no choice but to go green. This is not a trend. It is a movement. It is a shift in consciousness, in our habitual practices, and a change for the betterment of the planet. The reality is we simply cannot continue to deplete our earth’s resources at the same rate, nor can we continue to treat the people who make our clothing unfairly.

So how does a fashion business become sustainable? Where do you even begin? First, it is important to understand the impact that the fashion industry has on the environment and human health. Its not enough to just decide one day that you want to go green; either because you think it’s a trend or because you believe its the right thing to do.



It all comes down to awareness, particularly around the two biggest environmental challenges that the industry faces today. These are the use of toxic chemicals, both in farming and manufacturing; and the issue of water usage and disposal. These two issues have resulted in the fashion industry being labeled as one of the world's worst offenders when it comes to pollution.

The toxic chemicals used to manufacture fabrics are extensive, with as many as two thousand. The most serious are those that were originally developed in WWII as nerve gases.

The cotton industry tops all others when it comes to pesticide use, with about 1/4 of the world's pesticides used in its growth. Putting it more simply, 1lb of cotton requires 1/3 lb of chemicals to produce. Cotton farmers are spraying these life-threatening toxins on their crops, and on an average of 30 to 40 times per season. According to the World Health Organization, more than 20,000 lives are lost to pesticide poisoning in developing countries.

Pesticides are most often sprayed from the air, so they spread easily to surrounding neighborhoods. Only an estimated ten percent of the chemicals actually accomplish their goal; the rest are absorbed by soil, air, plants, water, and our bodies, killing wildlife and harming ecosystems.

And then there are dyes. All synthetic dyes are made from coal tar, one of the most carcinogenic substances on the planet. Conventional dye processing discharges massive amounts of toxic chemicals into the environment, including huge amounts of dioxins, the world's number one carcinogen.

And if that isn't enough to shock you, finished garments are usually treated with additional chemicals such as formaldehyde, an anti-wrinkle and stain-resistant agent commonly found on

cotton and wool, and flame-retardants (remarkably common in children's sleepwear).

An equally important issue in fashion is water. Water is one of earth's most precious resources, but it is quickly becoming scarce. The quality of water in rivers and streams

has deteriorated, due to pollution from cities, industry and agriculture. Ecosystems are being destroyed, and over one billion people lack safe drinking water.

Water is used at every step of the textile manufacturing process, from farming to finished product. The fashion and textile industry is the second largest polluter of clean water, next to agriculture. In conventional farming, large amounts of water are required to spray the crops with the chemicals, and the soil does not absorb as much water as it does with organic cotton.

The *disposal* of the fashion industry's wastewater results in the contamination of groundwater, affecting many people worldwide. Textile mills discharge millions of gallons of liquid sewage each year, full of life-threatening chemicals that come from dyes, bleaches, equalizers, detergents and heavy metals such as lead and mercury.

Without this knowledge, there is absolutely no way that the fashion industry can change. Thankfully, a growing number of large apparel companies are becoming aware and are taking on more sustainable measures. But this change should not be implemented from top down. No matter what size of business, we should all be empowered with this knowledge. We all need to recognize how important the truth is. Knowing the facts makes it that much harder to turn a blind eye.

The time is now for the fashion industry to recognize its negative impact on the environment and human health, and to do something about it. It is time to rally together to make change. It is time to put demands on our supply chains, to ensure that at every stage we are being mindful and responsible. It is time to put more pressure on our government, to enforce standards, and to offer incentives. Knowledge is the key to power; the power to make a difference.

“True fashion is about non-toxicity. If fashion pollutes, it should no longer be called fashion, it should be called pollution.”

– Horst Rechelbacher, Founder Intelligent Nutrients & Aveda

## BIO

**Kelly Drennan** is the founder of Fashion Takes Action (FTA) a members based organization that addresses these very issues. FTA works with all levels of the fashion industry, and in three distinct areas: Education & Resources, Research & Product Development, and Marketing & Communications.

→ For more information please visit: [www.fashiontakesaction.com](http://www.fashiontakesaction.com). Follow Kelly on twitter @ecofashionista.