



10 Minutes for the Planet

Sustainable fashion - do you like wearing green? ©

by Sarah Heath

Hello! I'm Sarah Heath and you're listening to 10 Minutes for the Planet on EnglishWaves.

The term "fast fashion" has become familiar to the high streets as retailers produce new clothing lines in rapid succession to keep up with latest trends coming off the catwalk. The main emphasis being on "quick manufacturing at an affordable price". But as this disposable era in which consumers demand new products as soon as possible, what are the impacts on the global environment?

For every one of the 7 billion people alive on the planet today, twenty pieces of clothing are manufactured every year. These billions of items are being churned out of factories in third-world countries such as Bangladesh, the Philippines, Ethiopia and Sri Lanka, in ever greater quantities. There has been a 400% increase in the past 20 years as consumers purchase 60% more items of clothing within the same time frame. However, they also keep these clothes for half the length of time than previously.

The predicament for the environment is twofold: firstly, there is the negative effects created by the production of clothes and secondly, the amount of textile waste being thrown out every year. The fashion industry ranks only second to the oil industry as the world's biggest polluter.

Cotton accounts for the highest level of natural fibres used in the clothing industry, found in around 33% of clothes. And it is an exceedingly thirsty crop to grow, needing over 2,500 litres of water to make one simple shirt. As much production takes place in countries which suffer frequent water shortages, there ends up being major shortfalls for human consumption. A Guardian reporter uncovered figures showing that 100 million people in India do not have access to drinking water while up to 85% of the entire country's needs is used up to water cotton crops. The Aral Sea has almost dried up as a result of cotton farmers draining two rivers which feed into it. And these statistics do not include the thousands of litres required additionally in the dyeing and finishing processes.

These techniques release chemicals into the waterways and substantial spraying of cotton crops with pesticides is leading to birth defects in those born to cotton farmers in India, as highlighted in a documentary called "The True Cost", who reveal that cotton farming makes up 25% of global insecticide use.

Synthetic material such as polyester has less need for huge quantities of water but per kilogram produced, they emit far higher levels of greenhouse gases. In 2015, the production of polyester for the clothing industry released 706 billion kilograms of gases assessed to have a negative impact on the environment. This equates to the emissions of 185 coal-fired power plants.

The second main issue with fast fashion is the waste it produces: the United States, for example, disposes of 14 million tons of textile waste each year, much of which ends up being incinerated, adding to greenhouse gas levels. And upper-price-bracket brands like Burberry, have admitted to burning unsold stock rather than selling it cheaply in order to protect the brand's exclusivity!

Is the message about this industry's contribution to climate change sinking in? The United Nations has asked clothes manufacturers to sign up to using circular supply chains by 2030 and a related initiative in Copenhagen in 2017, has signed up fashion brands to use mono-fibres rather than mixed synthetics, to improve recycling methods and move away from materials like polyester. Within a year, 12.5% of clothes companies had signed up including big-name players such as Nike and Gap. H&M have designed a line made from organic materials which would otherwise have gone to waste.

There are some more unusual initiatives which are growing in popularity: a vegan leather alternative is already in production by a company called Piñatex whereby the 'leather' is in fact discarded pineapple leaves! Orange peel is being used to make a form of silk and algae is an alternative material used for making shoe soles.

The outdoor clothing line, Patagonia, has introduced a repair service and other brands are trialling the rental of their clothes. Zady's wants to promote 'slow fashion' and has produced sustainability guidelines which can be used across the industry as a whole.

So, how to help reduce the speed with which the fashion industry is turning? Several tips, as suggested by "The True Cost" production, include getting consumers to consider if they will wear a garment at least 30 times; buying clothes from companies who follow Fairtrade regulations; following Greenpeace's Detox programme to see which manufacturers are working towards more environmentally-friendly production and for consumers to educate themselves on the provenance of the clothes they wear.

Tune in next week for more stories on the environment, here on English Waves.