

Sustainable Style: How To Choose The Best Clothing For The Planet

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Abstract:

The clothing industry represents a significant portion of the average American family's consumption patterns with revenue from retailers totaling over \$160 billion annually. Standard clothing production is unsustainable. Production includes high amounts of pesticides, extensive amounts of water as well as high levels of greenhouse gas emissions. Social issues in the clothing industry include poor working conditions, lack of employee benefits and community relationships. In order to drive change, consumers must be educated about choices to shop sustainably. These choices include materials, ways of production, corporate policies and social responsibilities that can provide sustainable options. Based on the research presented, consumers can make specific choices such as buying organic cotton and supporting responsible companies, thereby shaping a sustainable clothing industry for the future. Sustainable options are more expensive but are beneficial when they are long-lasting.

Results and Recommendation

	Avoid	Poor	Good	Better	Best
Materials	Polyester/Nylon: Uses extensive amounts of water and oil for production, not biodegradable	Cotton: Significant amounts of water, pesticides and labor used. Accounts for 40% of total world fiber production	Bamboo: Grows quickly and requires few pesticides, 100% biodegradable but prices are very high due to limited industry	Organic Cotton: No pesticides used or other toxic materials, still very small part of industry	Reuse clothing or buy secondhand to avoid producing new items
Social Sustainability	Sweatshops: Poor working conditions and child workers should always be avoided	Limited Benefits: No providing workers or employees benefits is unsustainable for community at large	Community Involvement: Those who give to community continue social sustainability of their products	Social Responsibility: Providing workers benefits and good wages, incentives for workers to be environmentally conscious	Fair Trade: Sustainability on ethical and business level, ensures good working conditions and environmental responsibility
Companies	Nike: Still issues with sweatshop use, minimal sustainable efforts, lots of greenwashing	Walmart: Although they do not provide benefits to employees, they do sell cheap organic clothing and continue to expand sustainable efforts	Gap: Requires access to working conditions, provides benefits and social responsibility through clothing campaigns	Online retailers: Easy to find sites that provide fair trade, organic clothing, examples include EcoPlum.com	Patagonia: Provide take-back programs for clothing, community involvement of employees and commitment to environmental protection

Methods:

The predominate method of research was a significant **literature review**.

- Clothing industry as a whole illustrate high levels of consumption and rapid change in what is desirable, creating a highly unsustainable model.
- Producing materials proved to have severe negative impacts on the environment.
- Ways in which companies operate their business can have impacts on social sustainability. The industry as a whole is working to be more sustainable with the development of the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, which is dedicated to reducing environmental and ethical impacts of clothing.

Market Survey

- Various retailers and manufacturers were examined to determine what options are best for the average consumer living in St. Cloud, MN. The criteria included social and environmental sustainability while also considering availability and price.

Greenwashing and Labels

Consumers must be aware of greenwashing in which companies present clothing as sustainable when in actuality it may not be. Significant demand for sustainable clothing drives companies to market towards these consumers even when they are not truly sustainable.

The logos listed ensure third-party verification and indicate the company is committed to being truly sustainable. This includes Green Seal, Organic-Certified and Sustainable Forestry-Certified.



Labels to look for but often only found online.



Avoid greenwashing.

Conclusion:

There are certain materials, practices and companies listed above that provide consumers with good alternatives in relation to sustainable clothing. The best option is to buy less or choose durable products that will last longer. Consumers should buy organic cotton, available at Walmart inexpensively. Patagonia and The North Face are environmentally and socially sustainable, available online or at Scheel's. Fair Trade clothing is not readily available except online and is more expensive. Sustainable options are not always the most affordable, but the benefits of purchasing such items often outweighs the price. There is the potential of the industry to become more sustainable through internal standards and regulations as well as consumer demand.

