

FASHIONISTA

THE FASHIONISTA GUIDE TO
SUSTAINABLE AND ETHICAL FASHION

Welcome to Fashionista's guide to sustainable and ethical fashion!

Sometimes it feels like the rise in conversations around sustainability and ethics has ultimately resulted in more confusion for consumers and business owners alike. With “sustainability” becoming a vague blanket term for all things relating to social and environmental responsibility, what language can we actually trust? Who is being left out of the “sustainability” conversation and why, and who is actually pushing that conversation forward? What are the latest innovations in sustainable sourcing and manufacturing, and who's actually investing in them? Fashionista has spent years trying to answer these questions and more, resulting in a far-reaching assortment of stories and resources for conscious shoppers and businesses alike. We hope you find them helpful.





NO AUTHENTICATION MEANS NO SUSTAINABILITY

Only products that can self-sufficiently certify their genuine status can be considered truly sustainable.

One of the most important issues — or the most important issue, many would argue — facing fashion brands, fashion manufacturers, fashion journalists and fashion consumers today is sustainability. In the past few years, industry figures have begun taking their environmental and social impact far more seriously, and shoppers have become more conscious than ever of their consumption habits, but there's still a lot more brands can do.

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One opportunity brands have — that can both reduce their social and environmental impact and help their customers consume fashion more responsibly — is in product authentication. You might be wondering: How? Keep reading.

Despite efforts to regulate their production and impede their proliferation, fakes are still entering the marketplace — the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) found that up to 10% of the total world trade is from counterfeit goods — and the damage they cause goes far beyond the targeted brand. Production is unregulated, meaning there's an increased likelihood of pollution and the use of harmful chemicals, and there's an increased likelihood of underpayment, child labor, unhealthy and unsafe facilities and other human rights violations, while their sale further perpetuates organized crime and other illegal trades.

Sustainable brands are high-risk targets for counterfeiters, as the demand for sustainable fashion becomes increasingly popular and consumers are willing to pay a premium for it. While brands may not have the power to single-handedly end the knockoff trade, they can ensure that consumers never unknowingly purchase a fake version of their product by implementing the right authentication solutions.

With CertiLogo's secure authentication, brands enable their consumers to scan a product with their smartphone and get instant confirmation of its genuine or fake status. A powerful weapon to mitigate the damage caused by illegitimate products, to be sure, authentication is also maturing into a foundational technology that is underpinning even more effective sustainability initiatives. And it's not only applicable to luxury brands — fashion companies of all kinds can benefit from, and more effectively achieve their sustainability goals with, effective authentication.

Only a securely identifiable product, for instance, can be transparently traced along its supply chain and demonstrate its green claims with certifiable data, creating more trust in the consumer and justifying any premium brands are asking consumers to pay.

Meanwhile, services like rental, repair, resale and recycling require authentication for returns management and end-of-life processing — both to match individual items to a specific customer and to avoid the risk of processing fake or non-own-brand goods. Manual authentication is burdensome and expensive and reduces the viability of such important initiatives.

Products with authentication built-in are also easier to sell and command higher prices on the resale market, giving consumers the ability to recoup more of their initial investment and incentivizing the use of re-commerce to further extend product life cycles.

Authentication also simply hooks customers in, giving them a reason to interact further with brands. They might use the technology to check a product's authenticity (or prove it when it's time to resell); but once connected, they'll engage with more sustainability content and services and ultimately help foster a more responsible sustainability culture. By directly involving the consumer, brands can extend the life of their products and build a more circular business model, reducing their impact in a far more meaningful way than tackling counterfeits alone.

Authentication is just one of many possible solutions to fashion's sustainability issues. Here at Fashionista, we've spent years reporting on the most promising ones. We've talked to the experts, visited the factories and filtered out the abundant greenwashing b.s. to put together stories and explainers for conscious shoppers and businesses alike. Our best work is now neatly packaged into one exceptionally digestible (and free!) resource: The Fashionista Guide to Sustainable and Ethical Fashion.

It has a primer on ethical fashion certifications, a deep dive into the sustainability of faux fur when compared to real, guidance on how ethical production factors into clothing prices, an explainer on how regenerative farming could change, well, everything — and much more.

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FASHIONISTA'S COMPLETE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO ETHICAL FASHION CERTIFICATIONS

A handy cheat sheet for keeping straight what labels like Fair Trade, Bluesign and B Corp mean.

WHITNEY BAUCK

Image Credit: Imaxtree

If you're aware that there are ethical issues baked into making clothes but don't have time to do in-depth supply chain research every time you need a new pair of socks, there's a good chance you've thought at some point: "If only someone could just tell me for sure if this brand is ethical or not."

You wouldn't be alone in that desire. In years of writing about both [sustainability](#) and [ethics](#), it's a sentiment I've heard from fashion consumers a lot. While many people want to be more conscious with their consumption, they also wish it were easier to tell which brands are truly being kind to people and planet.

If you fall into that category, there's good news and bad news. The bad news is that a one-size-fits-all ethical fashion certification will probably never exist, partly because not everyone agrees on what qualifies as "ethical." Should that word refer to job creation in impoverished communities or animal welfare? Should it mean making clothes from organic materials or recycled synthetic ones? Not every ethical fashion fan has the same standards or priorities, and that will always make a one-size-fits-all approach to ethical fashion certification difficult.

But the good news is that there are a host of certifications out there that can help consumers get a sense for which brands meet certain standards, whether they relate to the toxicity of dyes, carbon emissions, fair pay for artisans or something else entirely. Here, we rounded up a dozen of the most important certifications that apply to fashion ethics to help you quickly decode the priorities of any brand that uses them. The point of this guide is not to debate the relative merits of one certification against another, but to give a quick intro to some of the ones worth knowing.

B CORP

What it is: [B Corp](#) certification is a general “stamp of approval” awarded by non-profit B Lab to companies that have proven a commitment to doing good across a wide range of categories. B Corp certified companies are “legally required to consider the impact of their decisions on their workers, customers, suppliers, community and the environment,” according to [the B Corp website](#). (Read a full explainer on B Corps [here](#).)

What it's best for: Identifying brands that are generally committed to “doing good,” though individual brands may emphasize different practices to get there.

Brands that use it: [Eileen Fisher](#), [Patagonia](#), [Allbirds](#), Kotn, Helpsy

BETTER COTTON STANDARD

What it is: The Better Cotton Standard is awarded to cotton producers by the [Better Cotton Initiative](#) (BCI), which is the largest cotton sustainability program in the world. According to its [website](#), the Better Cotton Standard System is concerned with environmental, social and economic sustainability in cotton production. It pursues those aims by trying to reduce the environmental impact of cotton farming, improving livelihoods and encouraging brand adoption of the initiative.

What it's best for: Identifying companies that want to make a public commitment to more ethical cotton sourcing, but aren't committed to going fully organic or GMO- and pesticide-free.

Brands that use it: Asos, [Nike](#), [Levi's](#), Inditex, Gap Inc., Tommy Hilfiger

BLUESIGN

What it is: [Bluesign](#) is a standard awarded to textile manufacturers that ensures they're producing in the most environmentally-friendly, health-conscious way possible and is backed by Swiss organization Bluesign Technologies. Bluesign certification takes into account everything from water conservation to chemical usage to dye toxicity in an effort to protect both the workers involved in manufacturing and the consumers who will purchase the final product.

What it's best for: Identifying textile mills that are using processes and materials designed to reduce environmental impact, with an emphasis on minimizing toxicity.

Brands that use it: [Adidas](#), Columbia, L.L. Bean, Asics, REI, Outerknown, Burton

CLIMATE BENEFICIAL

What it is: Climate Beneficial verification is awarded to farmers by non-profit [Fibershed](#) as a way of ensuring that the process of creating the material in question — at this point, it's usually wool, though other materials may be coming soon — is contributing to a net positive impact on the climate. This is done by raising sheep in such a way that the farming process actually sequesters more carbon than it emits.



Sheep on a ranch that is part of Fibershed's Climate Beneficial program. Photo: Paige Green Photography/ Courtesy of Fibershed

What it's best for: Identifying wool sources that don't just minimize negative outcomes from farming, but are actually helping sequester excess carbon.

Brands that use it: The North Face, Coyuchi, Huston Textile Company, Brooklyn Tweed [and more](#)

CRADLE TO CRADLE

What it is: [Cradle to Cradle](#) certification is granted to specific products that are composed solely of either natural materials that can safely return to the earth to decompose, or synthetic materials can be used over and over in perpetuity without downgrading their quality. Awarded by the Cradle to Cradle Products Innovation Institute, the certification comes in levels (i.e. Gold, Silver, Platinum) that demonstrate how close a given product comes to hitting that goal.

What it's best for: Identifying brands that are thinking about the end-of-life impact of their product, not just the ethics of material sourcing on the front end.

Brands that use it: [G-Star Raw](#), Wolford, Pendleton

FAIR TRADE USA

What it is: [Fair Trade](#) Certification is awarded to products that are made under conditions that prioritize worker safety and fair pay. According to certifying body Fair Trade USA's [website](#), goods with the Fair Trade seal are made by people who “work in safe conditions, protect the environment, build sustainable livelihoods and earn additional money to empower and uplift their communities.”

What it's best for: Identifying brands that are placing an emphasis on garment laborers' rights in their supply chain.

Brands that use it: [Madewell](#), Athleta, Outerknown, Prana, J.Crew

GLOBAL ORGANIC TEXTILE STANDARD (GOTS)

What it is: [GOTS](#) is a certification which helps verify that a given textile was made using organic materials, and/or that a mill, dyehouse, farmer or other producer used organic practices to create its textiles. It can be awarded by a number of different certification bodies that all operate using the same set of standards dealing with organic fibers, dyes, chemicals and bleaches, in addition to upholding the labor standards set forth by the International Labor Organization.

What it's best for: Identifying brands that are committed to sourcing organic.

Brands that use it: Stella McCartney, H&M, Kowtow, The Summer House

LEATHER WORKING GROUP

What it is: The [Leather Working Group](#) certifies tanneries and leather traders with Gold, Silver or Bronze rankings based on their adherence to guidelines intended to protect the environment. Like GOTS, LWG certification can be carried out by numerous third party auditors that follow the established protocol, and takes into account things like waste management, chemical usage and energy consumption.

What it's best for: Identifying brands that are seeking to source leather from environmentally responsible suppliers.

Brands that use it: Nisolo, Timberland, [Everlane](#), Dr. Martens, Aldo



Inside a tannery. Photo: Andreas Rentz/Getty Images

NEST SEAL OF ETHICAL HANDCRAFT

What it is: Created by [Nest](#), a non-profit focused on artisan work, the Nest Seal of Ethical Handcraft communicates that a product has been made handmade under fair and ethical conditions. According to Nest's website, brands are evaluated based on "worker rights and business transparency, child advocacy and protection, fair compensation and benefits, health and safety and environmental care." Since the seal is relatively new, it's currently in the process of being adopted by fashion brands, with more to roll out soon.

What it's best for: Identifying brands that work ethically with artisans in home or workshop settings rather than mass-producing.

Brands that use it: West Elm, others in process.

STANDARD 100 BY OEKO-TEX

What it is: While the organization behind [Oeko-Tex](#) (full name: International Association for Research and Testing in the Field of Textile and Leather Ecology) issues a number of different certifications relevant to fashion, the Standard 100 is the most commonly encountered by consumers. It certifies that textiles are free of substances that can be harmful to humans.

What it's best for: Identifying brands that are committed to keeping toxic dyes and chemicals out of their textile processing and final products.

Brands that use it: [Reformation](#), Outland Denim, Calvin Klein, Van Heusen

REGENERATIVE ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

What it is: Though it's still in the pilot phase and won't be widely available for awhile, the [Regenerative Organic Certification](#) created by the Regenerative Organic Alliance will certify that agricultural products like wool and hemp were produced on farms that promote soil health, animal welfare and social fairness. The ROC is based on the concept of [regenerative farming](#), which is designed to sequester carbon by nurturing healthy soil.

What it's best for: Identifying brands that are working with fiber farmers who are aiming to draw a maximum amount of carbon out of the atmosphere through agriculture.

Brands involved: Patagonia, Prana

USDA ORGANIC

What it is: The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Organic seal certifies that an agricultural product like cotton or cashmere was produced without the use of synthetic pesticides, fertilizers or GMOs. (Worth noting: this label applies to the fibers themselves, but doesn't necessarily cover dyes, finishes or other treatments that might be applied to a textile.) The USDA allows GOTS-certified textiles to be sold in the United States as organic, too.

What it's best for: Identifying brands that are using natural fibers that are GMO-free and grown without synthetic fertilizers or pesticides.

Brands that use it: Pact, Groceries Apparel, For Days



CAN FASHION SHOWS EVER BE ENVIRONMENTALLY JUSTIFIABLE?

As fashion month stretches on, so does the debate about whether all the elaborate runway shows and international flights required to see them in person are worth it.

WHITNEY BAUCK

Image Credit: Imaxtree

When [Karl Lagerfeld](#) staged a runway presentation around a [Chanel-branded rocket ship](#) — complete with moving liftoff effect — in the spring of 2017, it inspired a flurry of awe-filled Instagram posts and reviews from attendees. Almost none of the coverage touched on the environmental footprint of constructing a building-sized prop for the sake of a show that would last 20 minutes.

Just three years later, that response is nearly unthinkable.

These are the days of brands boasting about “[carbon neutrality](#),” of [Extinction Rebellion](#) protestors calling for the shutdown of [London Fashion Week](#) and of luxury labels wanting attendees to note that their seats will be recycled after the show. Climate apocalypse feels closer than ever, and fashion is sitting up and taking notice. The dialogue has shifted so much that [in a recent survey](#), 61% of fashion week participants reported feeling some guilt about the toll the whole event, and their involvement in it, takes on the environment.

So what should be done?

For some, taking that question seriously leaves room for only one answer: Runway shows have got to go. This is the approach advocated for by outsider activists like Extinction Rebellion, but it's also been adopted by some insiders, too.

The Swedish Fashion Council made waves in July by [announcing](#) that it would be canceling Stockholm Fashion Week indefinitely. “Claiming that we are aware of the problem [and] repeating what we have done in the past will not allow the necessary change to happen,” Jennie Rosén, the organization’s CEO, tells Fashionista in an email. “Switching from regular to organic cotton is not gonna cut it; neither will yet another fashion week in organic suiting.”

Instead, Rosén argues, brands should be willing to imagine a future beyond the runway. The Swedish Fashion Council is committed to setting up a new format for supporting local brands that Rosén claims “will not be comparable to a ‘fashion week,’ nor is [that] what the industry needs.”

The Swedish Fashion Council’s approach is noteworthy for its boldness, but it’s perhaps unsurprising that no other major fashion week has yet to follow Stockholm’s lead. Often, the dilemma is framed as a [simple financial equation](#): If the runway show drives significant sales or awareness for brands, then it isn’t going anywhere.

There are some who argue in favor of fashion week on the premise that it could actually have a more significant, positive impact on the environment by continuing — albeit in a different, much more [sustainability](#)-focused format — than by ceasing to exist entirely. [Copenhagen Fashion Week](#) is one such proponent: It [introduced a sustainability requirement](#) for any brands wishing to show on its schedule this season and promised to reduce its own greenhouse gas emissions by 50% over the next three years.

To some activists, there’s a tension inherent in the idea of creating a sustainability event that people fly from all over the world to attend. By the estimation of Copenhagen Fashion Week’s carbon calculating partner [Climaider](#) (called [Rensti](#)

in Denmark), the international flights booked by the event's attendees are by far the biggest source of carbon emissions connected to the gathering. Even if a brand opts to use local models, there are still the flights of all the international influencers, editors and buyers to account for — and the travel of the latter category alone is responsible for about 241,000 tons of CO2 emissions a year, according to a [recent report](#). That's comparable to the annual emissions of a small country.

Still, CEO of Copenhagen Fashion Week Cecilie Thorsmark believes the flights are worth it if the event significantly propels sustainability forward in the industry.

"If we, through our requirements, manage to actually drive change in the industry, then we are going to have a bigger impact than cancelling travel [would have]," she says in a phone interview. "We're [trying to] use the influence that we have."

Thorsmark's defense isn't too far off from the argument often used by climate scientists to justify flying to conferences to present research papers. The same dilemma faces every sustainability convening in the world that tries to have global reach, from the Conference of the Parties (COP) to various U.N. gatherings.

Dr. Arvind Ravikumar, an Assistant Professor of Energy Engineering at Harrisburg University who studies environmental and energy policy, says that whether an event's sustainability aims justify the flights it involves is up to every individual and organization to decide for themselves. He points out that when participants are primarily from developed nations in the West, there ought to be a greater sense of responsibility "to undo the decades of emitting carbon pollution into the atmosphere." Considering that the biggest fashion weeks on the calendar are all held in industrialized Western nations, this point is particularly relevant.

Still, he argues, there's plenty of merit to Thorsmark's perspective.

"If the conference ended up moving major fashion houses into developing a sustainable supply chain for their creations or force[d] them to reduce the carbon footprint of their operations, I'd say it would have been worth it," Ravikumar tells Fashionista via email.

Though [Paris Fashion Week](#) hasn't gone quite as far as Copenhagen in trying to establish itself as a sustainability authority, it too is starting to invest in tracking its own emissions. French fashion's governing body, the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, is currently experimenting with a new tool designed to track the "environmental, social and economic impact of PFW," according to Executive President Pascal Morand.

"[The tool] aims to take into account the following areas of impact (not exhaustive): transport, decor and scenography, communication and media, energy, choice of venue and catering," Morand notes in an email to Fashionista.



Cecilie Thorsmark addresses a crowd gathered for Copenhagen Fashion Week in January.

Photo: Lars Ronbog/Getty Images

This list hints at a few of the many ways runway shows can shrink their impact. They can take place in venues that don't require elaborate sets or energy-sucking heat lamps (the latter of which are often required at outdoor locations in winter) and that are near train stations (an incentive for attendees to take public transit over fossil fuel-guzzling cars). If food will be involved, plant-based menus have a smaller footprint than meat-heavy ones. Avoiding goodie bags, merch, single-use plastic and paper invites also cuts out unnecessary waste.

Not building a set at all is perhaps the lowest-impact option. But if a brand does opt to incorporate newly-built pieces on a runway, they can make sure the raw materials end up with an organization that can re-use them, which is crucial to building a [circular economy](#) that extends beyond clothing. In Paris, [La Réserve des Arts](#) picks up used set pieces that are then offered to its members — often local art and design students — to incorporate into their own creations. This keeps about 300 tons of material out of landfill every Paris Fashion Week according to Sandrine Andreini, La Réserve's Director.

"Usually at fashion week, there's the show, and then people destroy everything and throw it away and it's done," she tells Fashionista. "It could be textiles, leather, wood, plexiglass... We come, try to protect the materials as much as possible and then we put the materials in trucks. About 90% of those are going to have new life through our members."

La Réserve was inspired by New York City's [Materials for the Arts](#), which has also been working with brands on its fashion shows for years. Harriet Taub, the group's Executive Director, says that the donations they receive can be game-changing for public schools and other chronically underfunded organizations. Donations can take a variety of forms, like the extra-tall lucite chairs [Marc Jacobs](#) used to seat showgoers in 2018 that Materials for the Arts diverted to a local school that needed tall seats for the last row of their jazz band.

"If you can come to Materials for the Arts and get five chairs or two desks so you can save yourself \$2,000, maybe now you can put that into programming money, hiring a part-time staff

person or buying materials that you wouldn't be able to get from us," Taub says. "Those savings can be transformational to the budget of a small organization."

Materials for the Arts is also willing to work with brands on the front end of show production. Taub mentions that Bureau Betak, the production company famous for such highly-Instagrammable runways as the [Jacquemus](#) lavender field in Provence, approached the organization as it looked for recycled materials to use in [Gabriela Hearst's](#) Fall 2020 show.

Though [Bureau Betak](#) ended up going with a different source for its materials for logistical reasons, its [interest in working to make its events more sustainable](#) says something about where the industry is headed.

Ultimately, though, the impact of one runway show is a drop in the bucket in comparison to the overall carbon footprint of any given brand.

Géraldine Vallejo,
Sustainability Program

Director at [Kering](#) (parent company to Gucci, Bottega Veneta and Balenciaga), estimates that a brand's supply chain accounts for upwards of 90% of its overall impact. With that in mind, focusing too much on what happened to the chairs at a show or how many people flew in to see the collection might seem like a distraction from the bigger issue.

But it also might be the seed that grows into something far larger and more powerful: the normalization of emissions tracking in an industry that has been content not understanding its own environmental impact for far too long. The [lack of reliable data about this](#) is so glaring that whole [institutes](#) have been created to combat it, but the problem — and the [circulation of misinformation](#) — persists.

It's the symbolic power of the runway show, more than its actual footprint, that convinced climate consultancy [EcoAct](#) to work with Gabriela Hearst on creating the first-ever "carbon neutral" show last season.

"Events are a smaller part of our business," explains William Theisen, CEO of EcoAct North America. "What I really liked about Gabriela Hearst was the statement it was making, and that's why we decided to support them on this."



Anna Wintour in front of the chairs Marc Jacobs eventually donated to Materials for the Arts, which then passed them along to a local school's band program.

Photo: Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images

Already, it seems the gamble has paid off: Since working with Hearst in the fall (the two companies partnered again for Hearst's February show), Theisen says, EcoAct has seen an increase in inquiries from fashion brands — including some "very well-known luxury brands" — looking to track their own impacts. The most noteworthy part? They're not just

looking to track the impact of one show. They're hoping to measure their carbon footprint company-wide and start reducing it.

If all the hubbub about the environmental impact of fashion shows can inspire more of that far-reaching change, Thorsmark and Dr. Ravikumar may just turn out to be right about fashion week's power to drive sustainability in a manner that could justify its existence. If not, Extinction Rebellion and Stockholm Fashion Week's approach will continue look more compelling. Either way, one thing's clear: continuing to measure and reduce emissions is a must for any brand.

"We all know that we have to take action," Thorsmark says. "You might as well get started now."



THE ETHICAL FASHION MOVEMENT CAN'T PROGRESS IF IT IGNORES PLUS-SIZE SHOPPERS

The average woman wears larger than a size 14. So why aren't sustainable brands pushing to offer her more ethical shopping options?

WHITNEY BAUCK

Image Credit: Imaxtree

In the [five years since Rana Plaza](#), huge strides have been made by writers, bloggers and activists who want to see the fashion industry become more ethical from a human rights and environmental perspective. But for all that the movement has done to convince shoppers that their purchases ought to support companies that treat people and the planet well, it has largely ignored the fact that [the average American woman is a size 16 or 18](#) — and that means that regardless of her income or aesthetic preference, [ethical fashion](#) is often not an option for her, because it may not come in her size.

"The reality is the majority of what is out there [on the plus market] is [fast fashion](#)," says Kathryn Retzer, co-founder of luxury inclusive-sizing e-comm site [11 Honoré](#), over the phone. "It is not good for the environment, because the garments don't last that long."

Part of the problem in the past may have stemmed from the fact that fashion's emphasis on thinness meant the industry didn't expect people over a size 14 to be happy enough with themselves to invest in high-quality clothing that fit them as they were. Instead, those customers were often subtly encouraged to think of their bodies as something that could (or should) be altered to fit smaller clothing, rather than the other way around.

That's not just a problem from a body positivity standpoint — it's also a huge issue in terms of ethical consumption. Why would anyone invest in the kind of high-quality clothing that lasts for years and stays out of landfills if they're hoping to be a different size soon?

Thankfully, a growing body diversity movement and the success of well-loved public figures like model [Ashley Graham](#), blogger [Gabi Gregg](#) and designer [Christian Siriano](#) has continued to prove that it's possible to be healthy, happy with how you look and stylish at any size. Still, brands that offer extended sizing are woefully in the minority, and the ethical fashion scene has rarely been better about size inclusivity than its mainstream counterpart.

It's not necessarily straightforward fatphobia that's made that the case. While there are a few global corporations making real strides in terms of human rights and environmental standards, the truth is that many of the most innovative ethical companies are small operations with limited resources. [Mara Hoffman](#), a designer becoming known for her sustainable practices and who recently launched extended sizing for the first time, explains why it took her own brand as long as it did to offer more sizing options. "It's been something that we've wanted to do for years," Hoffman explains. "This past year we were finally able to have the bandwidth to do what we needed to do with integrity."

It takes more resources, she notes, because moving beyond a size 12 essentially requires that the designer start from scratch with a new pattern. Considering that Hoffman pays her usual size 4 fit model around \$370 an hour, adding more sizing doesn't just mean doubling the amount of time it takes to release one style — it also means a serious increase in cost as a new pattern is built and fit is perfected.

"It's an uphill battle to get even your existing fits the way that you want them to be," she adds. "Then to take on a completely different world where it's all about fit and you're still trying to perfect what you're already doing can be a bit daunting."

Hoffman, who now offers select styles in extended sizing on 11 Honoré, is one of a growing number of ethical designers trying to do better by their plus-size customers ("I know that we were late, I also think that it's important that we just started somewhere," Hoffman says). [Tome](#) and [Zero + Maria Cornejo](#) are two other luxury labels that have made conscious production core to their business, and both offer extended sizing on 11 Honoré, too.

At a slightly lower price point, there's eco-friendly favorite [Reformation](#), which just launched its own [plus-size collection](#) for the first time ever this year in collaboration with model Ali Tate Cutler. [Circular economy](#) thought leader [Eileen Fisher](#) offers a whole host of plus-size options. Indie label [Tuesday](#)

[Bassen's](#) quirky and inclusive clothing line is responsibly made from [deadstock](#) fabric in a Los Angeles factory. For minimalist, natural-material-loving fashion fans, Nashville-based brand [Elizabeth Suzann](#), LA-based [Pyne and Smith](#) and made-in-America favorite [Hackwith Design](#) all offer sizes above 14.

For plus-size consumers who want to commit wholeheartedly to shopping only with ethical brands, it's clear that there need to be more options on the market. But the fact that well-respected brands like Reformation and Mara Hoffman are making the jump is encouraging — and may indicate that more cause for optimism is on its way.

"Inclusivity and sustainability are the future of fashion," Retzer asserts. "These elements are important to [Generation Z](#), and they are our future." If Retzer's right, then any brand who can't find get on board in both the ethics and inclusivity department should expect to be left behind.



THE FUR SUSTAINABILITY DEBATE: IS REAL OR FAUX BETTER FOR THE PLANET?

With more and more designers ditching the real stuff, it's the question on everyone's mind.

HILARY GEORGE-PARKIN

Image Credit: Imaxtree

Back in the early '90s, the fashion industry's backlash against fur played out on billboards and in magazine ads, with supermodels stripping down and proclaiming that they'd "rather go naked" than wear it. Animal rights were the [era's cause célèbre](#), led by the controversial activists at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, who ambushed the halls of Vogue and Calvin Klein, shackled themselves to racks of sable coats at [Saks Fifth Avenue](#) and turned legions of celebrities into radicals — at least for a time.

More than two decades later, the fur industry (bruised, but not beaten by the campaigns against it) is back in the spotlight, as week after week it seems like another luxury brand [announces that it is going fur-free](#). In the past six months alone, [Gucci](#), [Versace](#), [Michael Kors](#), [Jimmy Choo](#), Furla, [John Galiano](#) and [Donna Karan](#) have added their names to the list. [Tom Ford](#) and Givenchy's [Clare Waight Keller](#) have pivoted away from exotic skins in favor of shearling, cowhide and fluffy faux furs. Yoox Net-A-Porter Group [stopped selling fur](#) last year, citing customer feedback, and for the May issue of InStyle, editor in chief Laura Brown [penned a letter](#) about her decision not to photograph fur for the magazine, a policy that's been in place since she arrived in 2016.

The shift is also occurring on the legislative front, with [San Francisco](#) recently becoming the largest U.S. city to ban fur sales (the law goes into effect in January 2019, though retailers will have a year to sell off their inventory), and [Norway outlining a plan](#) to shut down its remaining fox and mink farms by 2025.

This time, though, it isn't angry protestors at the head of the movement — CEOs and creative directors are signing on of their own accord. And the industry's conversations around fur have taken a distinctly 2018 turn, focusing not just on animal rights but also on environmental sustainability and whether wearing animals farmed for their fur still jibes with the lifestyle of today's hyper-attuned customer.

On the first front, at least, fur industry lobbyists seem happy to engage, arguing that faux is actually the less sustainable choice because it's generally made from acrylic, a synthetic material made from a non-renewable resource that can take [hundreds of years to biodegrade](#) in a landfill (animal fur, by contrast, biodegrades in just a few years). "Petroleum-based faux fur products are the complete antithesis of the concept of responsible environmental conservation," says Keith Kaplan, director of communications at the Fur Information Council of America. "Right off the top, petrol-based plastic fur is extremely harmful to the environment. It isn't biodegradable. It's harmful to wildlife."

There is also a [growing body of research](#) on the environmental impact of microfibers, the tiny plastic particles that synthetic fabrics shed in the wash. Whatever isn't filtered out by wastewater treatment plants can end up in waterways and in the food supply, ingested by aquatic animals. A [2016 study](#) published in Environmental Science & Technology found that synthetic

jackets released an average of 1,174 milligrams of microfibers when washed. Per the study's findings, front-loading washing machines and higher-quality textiles mitigate the damage; [Patagonia](#) also sells [a laundry bag](#) that helps trap fibers in the wash.

Finally, Kaplan contends that trapping wild animals like fox, beavers and coyotes, which constitutes about 15 percent of the trade, helps manage wildlife populations and provides a continued livelihood for many indigenous communities. "The fur trade provides a crucial, finely-tuned symbiotic relationship that helps to achieve the objectives of wildlife management and conservation and society as a whole," says Kaplan.

Anti-fur advocates agree that synthetics are a less-than-ideal substitute, but they point to environmental hazards in the fur manufacturing process — the [CO2 emissions](#) associated with keeping and feeding tens of thousands of mink on a single farm, [manure runoff](#) into nearby lakes and rivers, the formaldehyde, nonylphenol ethoxylates and other [toxic chemicals](#) used in fur dressing and dyeing — as evidence that the alternative is even worse. Plus, they say, the traps used to hunt wild animals have a history of ensnaring "[nontarget](#)" animals like domestic dogs, cats, birds and small mammals.

Both sides come armed with ample evidence backing up their claims, along with [arguments](#) for why the other's is flawed or biased. For even the most informed shopper, it's a lot to digest.

One thing we can do, however, is separate issues of sustainability from issues of ethics and animal welfare. If you're morally opposed to wearing fur or supporting brands that use it, the answer is fairly straightforward: avoid it. If, however, you don't feel particularly strongly about that side of the argument but want to make the best choices you can for the environment, there are other considerations to take into account, like the quality of a garment and how long you'll wear it.

Plus, says P.J. Smith, senior manager of fashion policy at the Humane Society of the United States, there aren't nearly as many compromises to make now that there are so many alternative options out there. "Gucci, when they went fur-free, they talked about how creativity can jump to many different directions," he says. "That could include faux fur, but I think they're trying to find other ways of creating a look and a feel that isn't necessarily just putting faux fur on it. I always like to think that innovation is what luxury is becoming — it's about being socially responsible and being innovative."

From his perspective, this is where the fur industry's case falls apart: "When a company goes fur-free, they're just getting rid of a product. It doesn't mean they're switching to another product." Some brands are using more shearling and cowhide — which, as byproducts (or at least co-products) of the food industry, don't fall into the same category as animals like mink, fox and raccoon dog, which are killed solely for their pelts, according to the [Fur Free Alliance](#). Others are making faux-fur coats that are designed to last as long as your great-

grandmother's mink, addressing one of the chief concerns about the material's environmental impact — its perceived disposability — from the outset.

Designer Kym Canter launched the ethical faux fur brand [House of Fluff](#) in November 2017, funding the line with proceeds raised from selling the 26 fur coats she accumulated over her years as the creative director at J. Mendel. Now, in place of exotic pieces made from monkey and ocelot, she makes shaggy cropped jackets and plush bombers out of cruelty free materials, and makes an effort to keep sustainability in mind at each step, choosing recycled polyester, making the collection in New York City to reduce its carbon footprint, and sourcing fabrics from Europe, where regulations around pollution are stricter than in China.

"We're making garments that are forever," says Canter. "They're not like what you get from Zara or someplace like that, where you're going to wear it for a season and then throw it out and it's going to end in a landfill. We're really making something that's going to have the lifespan of what real fur has."

She's not the only one that's trying to elevate faux: Gilles Mendel's daughter Chloé recently launched her brand [Maison Atia](#), making luxe outerwear using the same techniques and machines used in traditional fur production. London-based [Shrimps](#) has built a loyal fanbase around its candy-colored coats made from faux fur, vegan leather, and textural materials like coated denim, while Aussie label [Unreal Fur](#) designs stand-out jackets and stoles made to last longer than fast fashion at a still-accessible price point.

Canter's change of heart illustrates what many brands are really thinking of when they make the decision to go fur-free: their customers' approval. "You're seeing consumers care more about social concerns and reward companies for being socially responsible," says Smith. "I think brands recognize that, and you can see it on social media as well. When Gucci went fur-free, I think it was one of their most liked posts of all time."

He's been working with the Humane Society for nine years, and says conversations have taken on an entirely new tone even in the last three years, with brands approaching him rather than the reverse. He's started going into meetings with a new attitude, from, "You shouldn't do this, or you shouldn't do that," to being, "You know this is going to happen. This is happening. So you have an option at this point to either be a leader or fall behind other companies that are going to be rewarded for being socially-responsible and being leaders when it comes to animal welfare."

Kaplan at FICA disagrees that it's a done deal, pointing to millennials' affinity for fur trim (the industry's [fastest-growing category](#)) on parkas, sneakers, handbags and more, along with furry accessories like bag charms and striped scarves. Indeed, the global industry is still valued at more than \$40 billion (a number that dwarfs the market for faux fur), and one

need only walk around New York City in the winter to see that Canada Goose, Moncler, and other fur-friendly labels are as popular as ever.

Many designers also take the stance that genuine fur is the more sustainable option. London-based footwear label [Mou](#) avoids faux fur as a “non-biodegradable pollutant,” says founder Shelley Tichborne, but also because the fabric doesn’t “breathe” in the same way natural materials do, leading to unpleasant smells that are impossible to eradicate, shortening the product’s lifespan. “In contrast, the natural fibre materials we use such as calfskin, goatskin, sheepskin, antelope, lambskin and rabbit fur are by-products of the meat and dairy industries — all the animals are eaten for their meat, and some produce milk for human consumption,” she says. “The skins from these animals are naturally beautiful, soft to the touch, warm, bio-degradable and durable, lasting — with care — for up to thirty years.”

[Brother Vellies’](#) Aurora James, an outspoken advocate for sustainable fashion, has [likewise said](#) she chooses animal by-product furs over synthetics because of the environmental impact of the latter, although she acknowledges that the trade-off is that they aren’t cruelty-free. Unlike many brands (including ones that have publicly ditched fur), her leathers are also relatively eco-friendly: she uses Kudu skins produced from government-regulated culling, locally-sourced rabbit and springbok in Kenya and South Africa, and vegetable dyes.

Leather, Smith acknowledges, is another hurdle entirely. Apart from animal welfare issues, leather tanneries use toxic chemicals that pose [severe health risks](#) to workers and surrounding communities, usually in regions like [Bangladesh](#), India, and China where government protections are scarce, and end up in local waterways. Other than Stella McCartney, whose label has been famously fur- and leather-free since it launched in 2001, no major fashion house has committed to avoiding animal skins entirely. Leather also tends to be less controversial because cow hides and sheepskins are co-products of the food industry (McCartney, of course, is a staunch vegetarian).

In this area of the industry, at least, we’re seeing a third lane emerge: biofabricated leathers, which are grown in a lab using animal-free collagen. At the forefront of this technology is a startup called [Modern Meadow](#), which is developing bioleather that looks and feels like animal skins, without compromising the environment or animal welfare.

Creative Director Suzanne Lee says that they’ve seen significant interest from companies across various industries, including fashion and footwear. “Brands are seeking new raw material and manufacturing solutions from their supply chains, while design teams are always pushing for innovation that broadens their creative toolbox,” she says. “That is where biofabrication comes in. Biofabrication can deliver tailored materials with less waste and less impact on the environment. We hope that eventually consumers will ask for our materials by name when they buy their shoes, bags, furniture, and clothing in the coming years.”

Modern Meadow is developing an in-house bioleather materials brand, [Zoa™](#), which it [previewed at the Museum of Modern Art](#) last fall, and expects to fully launch sometime next year. The material is the result of five years of research and development, and while there are [other startups](#) that say they are working on bioengineering animal-free fur, Lee says it’s a complex problem to address.

“This is a wonderful aspiration but the reality is scientifically challenging,” she says. “To fully grow fur would require you to build a whole organ, essentially like a hair follicle. Long before someone commercializes fur there likely will be more desirable hi-value biomedical applications from such a technology. At Modern Meadow we fully understand the technical challenges to grow a bioleather material, so for us fur is much further out.”

Of course, that’s not to say it will never be a reality, and change, as we’ve seen, can come from a groundswell of consumers speaking out and backing up their beliefs with their spending dollars. Banning fur outright won’t solve the many issues in fashion’s supply chains, particularly when the alternatives are petroleum-based textiles, but so much consumer interest in what has long been an opaque part the industry can only be a good thing.

What we do know for sure is that cheap, disposable clothing (and our habit of buying and throwing out so much of it) is wreaking havoc on the environment, so choosing high-quality pieces that will hold up over time, shopping vintage where possible and making conscientious choices about your wardrobe is always a step in the right direction.

A photograph of a farmer wearing a hat and jeans, herding a large flock of sheep in a grassy field. The scene is set at sunset or sunrise, with a warm, golden light. A single tree stands in the background. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

THE NEXT WAVE OF SUSTAINABLE FASHION IS ALL ABOUT REGENERATIVE FARMING

What you need to know about the sustainability buzzword that's going to be everywhere in a few years.

WHITNEY BAUCK

Image Credit: Savory Institute

"I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is."

These words from Nobel Prize-nominated teen activist Greta Thunberg helped galvanize [1.4 million people](#) to take to the streets earlier this month to participate in the global school strikes for climate action. And while Thunberg's message about the environment was alarming, the underlying assumption was that there's real hope for addressing climate change.

When human beings have made such a mess of the planet, where does that hope arise from? For many experts, a groundbreaking way of thinking about agriculture — regenerative farming — offers one of the most concrete reasons for optimism.

"Agriculture really represents the best chance that we have of mitigating and ending the climate crisis," said [Patagonia](#) CEO [Rose Marcario](#) at the [National Retail Federation](#) in January. "The science is saying that if we converted all industrialized agriculture to regenerative, organic practices, we could sequester all the world's carbon."

The promise that regenerative farming practices could literally reverse climate change is staggering, but there's data to back it — and pioneering companies like Patagonia, [Kering](#) and [Prana](#) are investing in it as a result. In fact, they're so convinced of its potential for world-changing impact that it's not hard to imagine regenerative farming becoming as buzzy in the future as the [circular economy](#) is now.

"This is something that could create and will create the future of [sustainability](#)," claims Prana's Sustainability Director Rachel Lincoln in a phone interview.

So what exactly is regenerative agriculture, and how is it going to deliver on the massive claims being made about it? Here, we break down everything you need to know.

WHAT IS REGENERATIVE FARMING?

While much conversation about the environment hinges on the idea of sustainability — that is, maintaining the planet's current state and taking care not to degrade it — regenerative agriculture assumes that some things have already been so damaged that they need to be built back up before we can get by with merely sustaining them.

Regenerative agriculture applies that idea specifically to soil health. According to nonprofit [Regeneration International](#), the term refers to “farming and grazing practices that... reverse climate change by rebuilding soil organic matter and restoring degraded soil biodiversity.”

The average person may think of soil as belonging in the same category as something non-living like a rock, but truly healthy soil is teeming with living microorganisms like fungi, bacteria and protozoa. Elizabeth Whitlow, executive director of the [Regenerative Organic Alliance](#), compares these to probiotics in the human gut. Just as we need good bacteria to keep our digestive system running smoothly, the soil needs a community of microorganisms to help it grow healthy plants, sequester carbon and absorb water properly. While some kinds of farming destroy these microscopic life forms, regenerative farming helps build them back into the ecosystem.

Vice President of Social and Environmental Responsibility at Patagonia Cara Chacon thinks of regenerative agriculture as essentially starting with the foundation laid by organic farming and taking it to the next level. Ideally, she says in a phone interview, it should represent the “holy grail of agricultural responsibility,” encompassing best practices for farming that benefit soil, the plants and animals being farmed, the people doing the farming and those using the farmer's end products.

HOW IS IT PRACTICED?

The practices involved in regenerative agriculture can be wide-ranging and partly depend on the kind of farm in question. According to Whitlow, they might include using compost rather than synthetic fertilizer, planting windbreaks (rows of trees at the edge of a field that shelter it from wind, preventing soil erosion), avoiding synthetic pesticides, rotating crops (growing different kinds of crops on the same plot in different seasons to optimize nutrients in the soil), intercropping (growing two or more crops in the same space at the same time, like planting food crops between rows of cotton) and employing a no-till or low-till approach (planting seeds without digging up the ground).

These practices have a range of benefits, from slowing soil erosion to making plants more resilient to pests to making food crops more nutrient-dense. According to Kering's Sustainability Programs Director Géraldine Vallejo, they also result in higher-quality fibers and leathers, which is a clear boon for luxury producers. Besides sequestering carbon,

regeneratively-farmed land can help combat other side effects of climate change, like flooding, by making land more able to absorb water.



Photo: Courtesy of Patagonia/Regenerative Organic Alliance

“There are areas where you can see a regenerative farm right alongside a conventional farm and the conventional farm has streams of muddy water coming off of it, and the regenerative farm is just absorbing it like a giant sponge,” explains Whitlow on the phone. “It's said that it can absorb eight times more water.”

WHO'S ALREADY DOING IT?

Regenerative farming has seen its most significant traction in the natural food space, but fashion brands are making serious inroads, too. In December, Kering [announced](#) a partnership with the [Savory Institute](#), an NGO dedicated to the support of holistic land management and regenerative practices. The goal of the partnership is to help identify and develop a network of farms that Kering can use to source leather and fibers like cashmere, wool and cotton.

“Two thirds of environmental impact takes place at the very beginning of the supply chain at the raw material level,” explains Vallejo on the phone. “We knew that if we wanted to be efficient in reducing our environmental impact, we had to act on that.”

Savory's global reach and scientific approach to data collection made it an appealing partner for Kering, which is looking to slash its environmental impact 40 percent by 2025 and needs concrete ways to monitor its progress.

Patagonia and Prana are two other labels that have skin in the regenerative farming game. Both are allies of the Regenerative Organic Alliance, the organization headed by Whitlow that is trying to create a Regenerative Organic Certification as a standard for what regenerative farming actually means (similar to the way that the USDA Organic certification regulates what can legally be described as “organic farming”). Patagonia's Rose Marcario is also on ROA's board, and her brand is currently working on two pilot projects in India to convert existing organic cotton farms into fully regenerative ones.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

Although regenerative farming holds incredible promise for addressing environmental problems, obstacles remain. Achieving regenerative certification, once the certification is

finalized, will present an additional cost for farmers, which may be prohibitive. And since it's a multi-year process to convert a farm fully, it can be hard for farmers to invest if they don't have a brand promising to pay a premium from the outset. Although Whitlow dreams of a fund that could subsidize the cost of certification ("all the great farmers have to pay to prove how great they are!" she laments), no such fund currently exists.

The potential co-opting and greenwashing of the term "regenerative agriculture" also represents a threat. The Regenerative Organic Certification was essentially conceived of to combat this outcome. Players like Dr. Bronner's, Patagonia and Prana saw the growing buzz around regenerative farming and wanted to make sure it was a well-defined term so that no one could claim to be "regenerative" based on the fact that they were a low-till operation that also happens to use a ton of toxic herbicides, for example.

At the moment, the regenerative farming movement is new enough that its results — i.e. clothing derived from regeneratively farmed fibers — won't be widely accessible to fashion customers for awhile. (Patagonia, for example, hopes to be able to incorporate regenerative cotton from its pilot farms into product lines in two to six seasons.)

But with the incredible environment-saving potential of regenerative farming, conscious brands and consumers can hardly afford to overlook it.

"We don't want to close our eyes and say, 'we're a fashion group, we're not linked with agriculture,'" says Kering's Vallejo. "We think it's our responsibility to encourage the best practices of today."



Photo: Courtesy of Patagonia/Regenerative Organic Alliance



HOW SHOULD WE THINK ABOUT WHAT WE PAY FOR CLOTHES?

The price on the tag has to factor in the materials, labor, transportation, taxes and of course a retail markup, among other costs. When all these are added up, it becomes clear that someone is losing out in this equation.

MEGAN DOYLE

Image Credit: Imaxtree

How much would you pay for a white T-shirt? \$5? \$20? \$50?

Whether you care about brand names, sustainability credentials, material options or not, cost is one of the biggest factors that influences our buying decisions. Clothing has never been more affordable or accessible, with everything from ultra-cheap fast-fashion brands like Shein, FashionNova and Boohoo to high street giants like Zara and H&M available to shop 24/7 with just a few taps on our devices. For the cost of a coffee, you can buy a whole new outfit. Meanwhile, we're bombarded with messaging telling us to buy, buy, buy, with a host of incentives to spur us along: sales every other week, free shipping, free returns — you name it. That handbag you browsed yesterday? It now follows you around the internet via pop ups and targeted ads. Social media platforms have slowly evolved from community and content platforms into shopping destinations.

But do you know where the money ultimately ends up?

The [Clean Clothes Campaign](#), an international network of NGOs fighting for better working conditions in fashion's supply chains, [estimates](#) that the garment worker who sewed your shirt received just 3% of the price you paid for it. The people leading the brands that made it, though, are worth billions: The [Forbes 2021 Billionaires List](#) is full of fashion industry moguls who have made their fortune off the backs of garment workers that struggle to survive. (Zara's founder, Amancio Ortega, for one, is worth \$58 billion.)

While the price of consumer goods has risen with inflation over the last 30 years, U.S apparel prices [have been stagnant](#). Global supply chain issues and material shortages caused by the pandemic mean that the cost of our clothes is set to rise by at least 3%, up to more than 10% this year, per a 2022 "State of Fashion" report from [Business of Fashion and McKinsey & Company](#). Meanwhile, we're buying [far more](#) and [more](#).

"People simply don't understand that many of the low prices we see, especially on the high street, come from the exploitation of others," says Aja Barber, a UK-based American writer, consultant and author of ["Consumed: The Need for Collective Change."](#) "I tell people to look at the hourly wages we expect to pay ourselves, then learn about the labor which goes into making clothing or even better, attempt to sew a garment yourself. Once folks do that, they do start to grasp that much of the pricing we see is exploitative."

In 2019, Swiss NGO [Public Eye](#) broke down the cost of a Zara hoodie, from farm to final product, and found that the Spanish brand made more profit from one [€26 \(\\$29\) black hoodie](#) with R.E.S.P.E.C.T emblazoned across the chest (the irony!) than

all the workers in the supply chain put together. Much [attention and activism](#) has focused on the ways European and American fashion brands exploit garment manufacturers in places like Bangladesh, China, India and Vietnam, but worker wage theft also occurs closer to home: In 2020, [investigations into the factories making clothing for Boohoo in Leicester, U.K.](#), uncovered that the fast-fashion brand was paying garment workers £3.50 an hour — much lower than [the national minimum wage](#); in early 2022, garment workers in Haiti [staged protests demanding an increase in wages](#) from 500 gourdes (\$5) to 1,500 gourdes (\$15).

More transparency in pricing is crucial to educating consumers about where exactly their money is going. The price tag on your clothes has to factor in the materials, trims and hardware; labor, packaging, transportation, taxes; and of course a retail markup, which is usually [2.2 x the production cost](#). When all these are added up, it becomes clear that someone is losing out in this equation.

“It’s a wholly unsustainable model,” says Ilana Winterstein, urgent appeals campaigner for the [Clean Clothes Campaign](#). “If we want to be ethical — and if any brand wants to be ethical — it can’t be part of this, producing more and more with quicker turnaround times.”

New research from [The Industry We Want](#) reveals that the gap between what garment workers are earning and what they should be earning is [45%](#). It’s not just a few bad apples, though: This problem is systematic.

“Because of this lack of transparency, there may be a misconception that you pay more and it’s good, you pay less and it’s bad. But the whole industry isn’t set up with human rights in mind,” says Winterstein. “It’s not to say there aren’t some brands that are better and some that are worse, but from our perspective, there isn’t a single high street brand that’s paying all their workers a living wage.”

Most brands would agree that workers in their supply chains should be earning a living wage, but they draw the line at being held responsible. If, on the rare occasion they do make commitments and set targets, they go suspiciously quiet when they fail to meet them. Take H&M, for example — the Swedish fashion group [made a pledge in 2013](#) to pay a living wage to the 850,000 garments in their supply chain by 2018, [but according to the Clean Clothes Campaign, that didn’t and hasn’t happened](#). Since then, H&M has been linked to [wage theft in the Sindh province in Pakistan](#), as well as to [suppliers in the Xinjiang region of China](#). (Fashionista has reached out to H&M for comment.)

“What’s really important to understand about this industry is that the brands are the ones with the power,” says Winterstein. “If H&M really wanted to do this, nothing can be impossible for them, because the industry is built around what they need and want. It’s just that it works better the way it is for these brands. That’s the problem.”

It’s common practice for brands to “chase the needle” around the world, so to speak, in search for the cheapest factories. They’ll [pit suppliers against each other](#), forcing them to produce items for the lowest possible price; then, to stay in a

brand’s good books, factories will agree to [impossible production targets](#) and cut corners to save money, putting their workers’ [lives in danger](#) in the process. Many brands [don’t own the factories that make their product](#), a fact they’ll use to excuse not paying living wages — it’s out of their hands, they’ll argue.

“All the risk is passed down until it rests on the garment workers, and they’re the ones who have short term contracts, no money and unsafe working conditions,” says Winterstein. “They shoulder the entire risk of this global industry that allows total fluidity for brands. There’s no accountability. They can cut and run when they want.”

With all this in mind, it feels unlikely that brands would choose to absorb the costs of paying workers a fair wage.

Would higher prices on the consumer side equate to a more equitable industry?

“If we’re to have a system in which the workers get paid a living wage and the environmental impact is under control, will it be a more expensive endeavor than the cheapest of cheap fast fashion? Yeah, probably,” says Maxine Bédât, founder of the [New Standard Institute](#). “How much that will be is another question.”

Clean Clothes Campaign [has suggested](#) that it would cost brands as little as [10 cents](#) per T-shirt to ensure that the garment workers that made it had livable wages. “It wouldn’t be enormously more expensive, which is why we’ve become so focused on legislation and what can be done to ensure that the system gets the money to garment workers,” says Bédât.

After years of almost no government intervention on the industry’s rampant profit-at-any-cost practices, the last 18 months has seen a handful of ambitious pieces of legislation that could force brands to shape up. In California, the [Garment Worker Protection Act](#), signed into law last year, scrapped the [piece rate](#) (which paid workers as little as \$.03 per task) and secured minimum wage agreement for more than 40,000 people. In New York, the [Fashion Sustainability](#)



[Act](#) is a new bill that, if passed, would make brands with over \$100 million in revenue map and disclose their supply chains, along with information about wages and steps taken to pay their workers properly.

Currently, how much information brands share with their audience about how their products are made is entirely up to them, but legislation like the Fashion Act could make this radical transparency mandatory. [Everlane](#) and [Maison Cléo](#) provide a price explanation alongside each item on their online stores, helping customers to understand exactly what they're paying for. There are also a number of tech solutions emerging to help brands with traceability: In New York, [EON](#) creates digital IDs in the form of NFC (near field communication) tags or QR codes for brands like Pangaia and Gabriela Hearst, which reveal [all sorts of information](#) about a product, from [material composition to details of the factories where it was made](#).

We can't talk about raising the cost of clothing without recognizing the impact that would have on people who simply can't afford to spend more on clothing. "All of this legislation shouldn't be happening in isolation from addressing income inequality and understanding why we're in this place where some people can't afford clothing, or why people feel forced to consume fast fashion," says Bédard. "That also has to take place in order to address the whole system."

In recent years, there's been more conversation about (and scrutiny on) privilege within the sustainable fashion movement, especially when people feel shamed or judged for buying fast fashion because they might not have the means to spend more on their clothes — after all, a common complaint about sustainable fashion is that it's too expensive. There is however, a difference between a person who consciously buys clothing from fast fashion retailers because it's what they can afford versus content creators who buy boxes of throwaway clothes regularly to film haul videos for Youtube that will end up in landfill faster than you can say, "Like and subscribe!"

"Many use that reasoning to excuse all exploitative purchases, and that's wrong," says Barber. "A person spending \$200 on fast fashion a month can definitely make different choices. But within my book 'Consumed,' I discuss that I personally

believe the only way to change the game is to rally and fight for a rise in wages for all. Let's fight for a world where no one feels forced to buy the dress made in a sweatshop."

Of course, everyone has a different definition of expensive and affordable, and this can fluctuate depending on your financial circumstances. Bédard suggests that defining those parameters for yourself is one way to shop more consciously and avoid the allure of buying something just because it's cheap.

"I don't agree with the belief that fast fashion is terrible all the time and if you do it, you're evil," she says. "That's wrong. It totally ignores people's economic situations. But if someone can navigate what feels substantive to them, ensuring they're being thoughtful about it, that's a really good way of going about it."

Another way to get used to the idea of paying more for fashion is to realize that the industry operates on deception: Brands take advantage of our insecurities and tell us we're getting a great deal when we're not. Buying cheap clothes that you have to throw away after two wears isn't exactly the definition of a bargain.

"Nobody wants to be duped. That's why it's so important to get out these stories of how much of this is manipulation," says Bédard. "Of course, our brains are wired to want stuff, but that want is being manipulated for a few people to make a lot of money. We can't ignore the massive economy behind getting us here in the first place."

Like it or not, inflation means we'll be spending more at the till for clothing. But more education, accountability through legislation and transparent dialogue between brands and consumers are going to be the defining factors in getting shoppers to shift our thinking on what clothing should actually cost.

"I think it would take some unlearning before we get there. People are so used to low prices and will argue until they're blue in the face with living wage employers that something is unfairly priced," says Barber. "There needs to be more dialogue about why this is crappy behavior. We either want people to pay folks or we don't."

A portrait of Willow Defebaugh, a woman with long dark hair, smiling and resting her chin on her hand. The image is partially obscured by a text box on the right.

HOW 'ATMOS' EDITOR-IN-CHIEF WILLOW DEFEBAUGH IS BUILDING A NEW BRIDGE BETWEEN FASHION AND CLIMATE

"I'm rooting for the fashion industry," she shares, "because inherent in its purpose is also its capacity to change."

MAURA BRANNIGAN

Photo: Tami Aftab/Courtesy of Atmos

In 2018, a publishing wunderkind named Willow Defebaugh was hard at work in New York City, living the editorial dream. In just six short years, the fashion editor had already clocked gigs at the likes of Vogue and GQ, climbed the masthead at V Magazine and helped launch the U.S. edition of French fashion glossy L'Officiel. She was at the top of their game — but she was also nearing a breaking point.

Exhausted and burnt out, she says, Defebaugh was growing ever more conscious of the ways in which the fashion industry was — is — causing irreparable damage to the planet we all share. She was ready to pack it up in the interest of other, more stable creative pursuits when she was introduced to Jake Sargent, an entrepreneur who shared their desire to approach the climate crisis from a position of creativity and compassion.

In 2019, [Atmos](#), a biannual publication bridging climate and culture, debuted, its inaugural issue featuring contributions from heavy-hitters like Yoko Ono and Ryan McGinley. Now, more than three years and six issues in, the platform is stronger than ever with a voice entirely unto its own.

Atmos's tone, measured and buoyant, is as notable as its contents, which in any one issue run the gamut from [TikTok activists](#) to [forest ecology](#). It's reporting to be celebrated even despite of — or perhaps, really, in light of — the gravity of the climate crisis as it continues to unfurl. For Defebaugh, this is on par with their life's work.

"I often come back to the fact that I don't think, in our lifetimes, there's going to be a day where we're like, 'Well, we did it, we saved the planet,'" she says. "It's lifelong work, and it's not sustainable to be miserable for your entire life, so you have to find space to also have joy. Fashion has the ability to do that by also creating space for this conversation."

Ahead, Defebaugh walks us through their career trajectory — from interning in Vogue's fashion closet to interviewing boundary-breaking scientists — and discusses how their identity as a trans woman has impacted the ways in which she views environmental action. Read on for the highlights.

What first interested you about the intersection of fashion and climate? The start of my career was more on the fashion side of things. When I first moved to New York, I started as an intern and then freelance assistant working at Vogue and GQ, and then eventually made my way downtown to V Magazine, where I was for about five years.

Sustainability was always a growing presence in my mind. Ever since I was a child, nature has been my safe place and where I look to for creativity and inspiration. And when I was still at V — this was back in 2016, 2017 — I felt like I wanted to be doing more with my day-to-day storytelling. I was surrounded by so much creativity, working with some of the most talented photographers and writers and creative directors, and I kept thinking to myself, 'What would happen if we put all of this creativity toward a subject matter we can't get enough people to pay attention to right now?'

When I was at V, I had started a column where I was writing about sustainability, and it was creeping more and more into my work, but I also felt a sense of intimidation. There's a lot of gatekeeping that happens within environmentalism, where people feel like they have to be a perfect environmentalist in order to care about climate, and that's just not the case. The reality is, we need a million imperfect activists, rather than a few perfect activists, as the saying goes. And so those who might think they're part of the underlying causes of the climate crisis are the exact people we need to get involved. Those are the people we need to meet where they're at and not insist they be perfect from the get-go, but just work toward how they can use their specific gifts for this particular cause.

What lessons did you learn in that stage in your career that you still carry with you today? This might be somewhat of a clichéd answer, but the word that first comes to mind is perseverance. Fashion publishing is so cutthroat in a lot of ways, and it does breed a certain sense of determination. I apply that directly to my work in the climate space, which also requires a great deal of perseverance, but in a very different way.

One of the things I constantly learned working at V was how to make it work, so to speak. No one ever gave up. It was like, 'We're going to try to make the story happen, and we're going to try to make it as remarkable as it possibly can be.' Creating solutions and being creative in how we think about solutions is something that has stayed with me throughout my whole career.

In an industry that's so cutthroat, it can be very easy to lose sight of your values. That's something I learned for myself, how to always be your own moral compass and to make sure you're not sacrificing that. And Atmos, years and years later, was born out of that sense of being a values-driven publication. I learned it the hard way in some cases, but that was really invaluable in my career.

How did the Atmos opportunity come about? It came about at the perfect time for me. I had just left V and was working on the U.S. launch of L'Officiel, and one of my colleagues there put me in touch with Jake Sargent, who's my co-founder at Atmos and who mentioned he was really interested in starting a publication that looked at the intersection of climate and culture. That's where my head had been, as well.

I was in a space of total burnout, after spending most of my twenties working at different fashion publications. I felt totally exhausted and was like, 'Maybe publishing isn't right

for me.' And then when Jake and I met for the first time, we were so creatively aligned. It felt like a no-brainer that we were going to work together on this. So we decided to launch the magazine and just see where it would take us.

To be honest, I was really shocked. I mean, the first issue we had Ryan McKinley and Yoko Ono and all of these different photographers and artists who, even at that point in my career, I wasn't sure I, or we, would be able to bring into the conversation. And what we found more than anything is that people just wanted to help and lend their voices to this cause. I feel so fortunate that we're able to work with the photographers and writers and poets and artists we do, because they really make the magazine what it is.

What do you hope to accomplish in your role as editor-in-chief? My goal, really, is to change people's minds. I often come back to a quote that inspires so much of the work that we do, from "The Overstory" by Richard Powers. He says that the greatest arguments in the world can't change a person's mind — only a good story can do that. And that's what says it all.

I think the climate crisis, for so long, has been purely data-driven, and in environmental journalism particularly. Greta's story, why kids are striking and not going to school because what's the point if you don't have a livable future? That's a story that gets you in your heart. And that's what I'm passionate about doing, telling stories that come from an emotional place that really reaches people. Because that's what storytelling should do. It should appeal to us in our humanity and who we are as human beings.

If you were to go through the highlight reel of your time with Atmos, what would be the big moments that stand out to you? In Issue 4, I had a conversation with the musician Maggie Rogers, who happens to be a good friend of mine, and that story changed how I think about the ways of formatting stories. We had this conversation during the pandemic about slowing down the creative process and confronting the burnout a lot of people were experiencing. The photography we ended up running with for the story were these beautiful photographs of glaciers in Alaska by a photographer named Daniel Shea to go with this idea of a glacial pace. I love approaching stories from a totally different perspective.

Grimes, the artist, is on the cover of our new issue in conversation with the sci-fi author Nnedi Okorafor about science fiction and the spirituality of technology. That was such a powerful conversation to me because they talk a lot about how we're all becoming more and more connected. Grimes uses the analogy of all of us being neurons in a supercomputer, and that's what the internet is, right? We're all struggling with being part of the same thing, which is the human race. But to hear it from this tech perspective was such an interesting take on a concept that we already worked with. A magazine should challenge people's perspectives and get them to think about things from a different angle, and that story challenged my own thinking in a lot of interesting ways.

And then there are all of the scientific legends: Jane Goodall; Dr. Sylvia Earle; Dr. Suzanne Simard, a pioneering female scientist who discovered in Western science that trees are interconnected, something Indigenous science has known that for a long time. I just geek out over the fact that we can have musicians and artists and then also have scientists and authors.

There's still quite a high accessibility barrier that surrounds discussions of climate, particularly within the fashion space where, for consumers, sustainability is often introduced from a place of shame. What do you believe the industry needs to do to lower those barriers?

I love this question so much, because I think it's true: People have this immobilizing feeling that we've caused this, and the amount of shame that creates is so paralyzing that it causes a lot of people to turn away. The reality is that we do all have individual footprints, of course. And at the same time, many people don't even realize that the idea of calculating your carbon footprint was an invention by big oil. It was a PR tactic and it worked brilliantly because you got the whole population to feel so incredibly ashamed to the point where they didn't want to actually engage in making meaningful change.

It's hugely liberating when you start to realize that just 100 companies are responsible for 71% of all global emissions. But at the same time, I'm somewhat wary because in the climate space, the conversation has just swung in that direction, you know? We need individual change and we need systemic change. Understanding that statistic doesn't give us free rein to behave how we want to behave and use as much as we want to use. Everything needs to happen on an individual level and a collective level, and that's how systemic change actually happens.

With that in mind, how can fashion-minded individuals who haven't yet participated in climate action — and who are perhaps feeling demoralized about the state of the climate crisis — best get involved? This is where I'm passionate about, yes, advocating for systemic change. If there's a local protest, go to your local protest. If there's a way you can connect with people in your community, do that, because activism does work. But also, individual change is necessary in looking at the role you play in your specific ecosystems. For me, it was like, 'Okay, I know how to edit magazines, so how can I make a magazine that's about these issues?'

On a more personal level, as a trans woman, I think a lot about transformation, right? This is a big theme in my life. And I think about that through the lens of climate activism and climate justice. I know that transformation is possible, and I know that human beings are capable of transforming and changing. I know because I'm living it and I see it every day. I see it in the many trans people who are in my life. It can be hard and it can be brutal, and there are parts that can be challenging. But it's also magnificent.

I'm not saying I feel optimistic every day, but a lot of my optimism does come from that personal place of, 'I know that this is possible because I've lived it.' If I can change, other

people can change, and if we can change, then our species can change. That's why, with Atmos, we often tell stories from a perspective of identity, because identity does shape how we see the world.

When you think about the future of fashion and climate, where do you imagine it going? I'm going to refer to a story that Elizabeth Cline wrote for our third issue. The focus was this idea that, maybe, fashion isn't something physical — that fashion is an energy. And she talked about this idea that stylists of the future will help people work with their own wardrobes. And I loved that idea because it got to the core of what fashion is or should be.

Like so many people, I was interested in fashion because I think it's an incredible tool for self-expression, which is an energy. And that excites me a lot because one of the principle rules within science is that energy can't be created or destroyed, only transformed. And not to bring it all back to transformation, but fashion is also a force of transformation. It helps people change how they see themselves and how they present themselves. I'm rooting for the fashion industry, because inherent in its purpose is also its capacity to change. Fashion does transform, and therefore I think the industry could transform.

What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the industry looking to follow a similar career path? Follow the threads. If you had told me when I was in my early 20s in New York that I would at some point be founding a publication that looks at the intersection of climate and culture, that perfectly weaves all of these different aspects of my career into one thing? I wouldn't have even known what to do with that information.

But that's not how things happen. They happen one thread at a time. I came here because I was interested in fashion, and the more I was interested in fashion, the more I was interested in the ways fashion was unsustainable. And I followed that.

I think of all of the moments where I thought, 'Well, I don't know where this is necessarily going to lead, but it feels like the right next thing for me to do,' and I think about how important all of that was. All the odd jobs, the internships, the freelance assignments, they all taught me different things. And I'm just so glad that I said yes to them at the time and that I trusted I would be able to weave them into something someday.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

LEAH THOMAS IS HELPING BUILD A MORE INTERSECTIONAL SUSTAINABILITY MOVEMENT

"I of course want to save the whales, but I also want to save Black people. Can we talk about that?"

WHITNEY BAUCK



Leah Thomas, founder of Intersectional Environmentalist.

When Leah Thomas [posted](#) a simple, colorful graphic with the words "Environmentalists for Black Lives Matter" to Instagram on May 28, she wasn't expecting it to go viral, much less launch her onto a new career path.

A former [Patagonia](#) employee who had built a small platform as a [sustainability](#)-focused fashion influencer, Thomas wasn't a stranger to online attention. But as the country erupted in the days following George Floyd's murder, Thomas's graphic — and the definition of intersectional environmentalism that she posted with it — tapped into a more-vital-than-ever conversation about the connections between environmental and racial justice.

"I of course want to save the whales, but I also want to save Black people," she says on the phone from her home in California. "Can we talk about that?"

In drawing connections between racism and environmental degradation, Thomas was following in the footsteps of figures like [Dr. Robert Bullard](#), the "father of environmental justice" whose work in the '70s pioneered an understanding of the ways that polluted air, land and water disproportionately harm Black, Indigenous and other people of color.

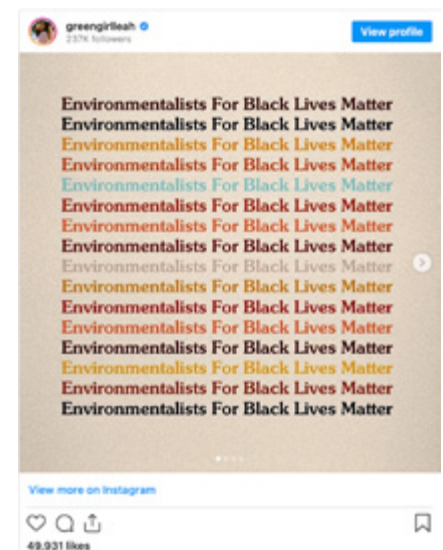
But she was also introducing a new generation to the concept of these interconnections in a way they could easily understand, and in the form of something beautiful enough that aesthetic-conscious Instagrammers were eager to share. Within two and a half weeks of posting, her following on [@greengirlleah](#) had grown from 12,900 to over 100,000 as the graphic was shared and reposted over and over again.

It wasn't too long after that Thomas decided to start a dedicated platform called [Intersectional Environmentalist](#) with some friends in the sustainability space in hopes of scaling up her ability to share more informative — and aesthetically pleasing — content in the same vein.

"We're looking at the ways race, culture, gender, sexuality, religion and so on might intersect with someone's identity" and with environmental justice, Thomas says.

Though the cynical might critique the pairing of ugly truths about racial injustice with pretty graphics, Thomas has long been comfortable with the idea that beauty and justice might go hand-in-hand. She's been working in fashion, after all, which she sees as inextricably connected to her environmental interests.

"When we think about intersectional environmentalism, there are so many case studies that can be found in the apparel industry," she says. "Because it touches environmentalism when you're talking about recycling or using certain materials, waste and dyes, and that sort of thing."



Thomas didn't always intend to end up in the fashion world. She studied environmental science and policy in undergrad and interned at a couple of National Parks early on. But then she started freelance writing for a site called [Kimberly Elise Natural Living](#), which she describes as "the Black [Goop](#)," and loved it.

From there, Thomas took a stint in communications at [Ecos](#), which makes eco-friendly cleaning products, before starting to write for "ethical fashion" site [The Good Trade](#) and landing her communications gig at Patagonia. A natural aptitude for writing and an eye for compelling imagery helped Thomas build out a modest following on Instagram along the way, which she used to promote brands like [Christy Dawn](#) and [Mejuri](#) while talking about sustainability and wellness. Pairing beautiful pictures with text that asks readers to go deeper has long been part of her modus operandi.

"Artists, in my opinion, are leading this revolution," she says. Which means that if a beautiful graphic lowers people's barrier to joining that revolution, then beautiful graphics she will make.

It's a sentiment reminiscent of one voiced by [Pyer Moss](#) designer [Kerby Jean-Raymond](#), who [claimed](#) earlier this summer that "we live in a meme society, and the revolution will be memed." Rather than believing that cheapens the movement, Jean-Raymond asserted that "catchy phrases and things like that do work."

What unites Jean-Raymond and Thomas's approach is that they both offer a whole lot of depth to back their quippy content. While Thomas's viral moment may have started with one post, she's trying to use Intersectional Environmentalist to build something more lasting.

The idea for the broader platform, she says, came from a group of friends who were at a [Black Lives Matter](#) protest together and started kicking around the idea of making a platform based on the idea of intersectional environmentalism. They quickly built a website with the help of a scrappy freelance web developer, linked to relevant content, assembled a council of advisors and launched a new [Instagram account](#), which gathered about 80,000 followers in its first month.

"We're trying to develop into a full-blown media house, exploring short-form media content and long-form video content," Thomas says.

Having worked with Patagonia's Media Grant Council during her tenure at the brand, Thomas is confident that Intersectional Environmentalist can find corporate sponsors to help fund their content. Even without advertising, the fledgling organization has already been approached by over 400 companies about potential partnership, she says.

Right now, Thomas and her co-founders are most focused on creating educational resources for companies that already profess a commitment to environmental sustainability, but may need to go further in making the connection to other forms of justice.

"I've heard a lot of stories from organizations like [Reformation](#) that have sustainability down to a T. But when it comes to people, especially Black and brown people, it's almost jaw-droppingly

terrible," she says. "There's a very, very high turnover rate for people of color at sustainability organizations."

The Intersectional Environmentalist (IE) Business Accountability Program, which Thomas and her team are working on right now, will combine educational curriculum that takes about three months to complete with accountability "check-ups" from the IE team. The idea is that leaders at top companies will participate in the program alongside a cohort of their peers from other companies as a way of growing towards a more intersectional understanding of sustainability.

Having worked at companies like Patagonia and [Kate Spade](#) in the past, Thomas and her cofounders "were able to see the loopholes of big corporations... especially regarding internal diversity and inclusion within leadership positions," she says, even amongst companies that are certified [Fair Trade](#) or donating to 1% for the Planet.

"We also saw a lot of tone-deaf messaging about Black Lives Matter," she adds. "Through the program, these companies will actually get to consult with us and the cohort of other businesses to be able to have better messaging that's a little more culturally competent."

After the business-focused course is developed, Thomas hopes to create tailored versions for other demographics, like college students or activists, and she's also looking to set up mentorship programs through the IE network.

As if all that weren't enough, Thomas is also working on her first book, which she hopes will be released by the fall of next year, while continuing to write and create content for other platforms. Her busy day-to-day now is a far cry from what she might have expected when she was first furloughed from her job at Patagonia in the spring and had to go on unemployment.

"Patagonia was my dream company. But I think if I was working there I wouldn't have had the courage to sit alone and really think about my values and what mattered to me," she says. "And that's why I decided to turn down an offer to come back."

As scary as leaping into the unknown in the middle of a pandemic and a recession might be, Thomas believes it's worth it to try and change the sustainability space for the better.

"I just feel really blessed to have this opportunity," she says. "Who would I be if I didn't try?"





FACTORY TOUR: EILEEN FISHER HELPS MAKE THE ECO-FASHION DREAM OF CIRCULARITY COME TRUE

An inside look at the brand's "Tiny Factory," where a meticulous sorting and record-keeping process transforms old clothes into new ones on a large scale.

WHITNEY BAUCK

Inside the Eileen Fisher Tiny Factory. Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when the idea of a ["circular economy"](#) gained critical mass in [sustainable](#) fashion circles, but suffice it to say that it went from a little-known concept to a wildly popular one in not much time at all. And understandably so: circularity refers to a process that is inherently regenerative. In the context of fashion, that means designing and using products in such a way that they can be endlessly used and re-used rather than being downgraded or thrown out.

With the average American [tossing 70 pounds of clothing and textiles every year](#), the idea that all that waste could be turned into new clothing rather than clogging up landfills is an enticing one, especially considering how hard it can be to convince a consumption-driven society to simply consume less. But in spite of the number of brands that have capitalized on the language of circularity and posted clothing donation bins outside their stores, the unfortunate truth is that turning old clothes into new ones isn't a simple or easy task. In fact, few brands have figured out to do so at scale.

That's why [Eileen Fisher's](#) Tiny Factory, located in Irvington, New York, is worth taking a close look at. Inside, an elaborate system of organizing, sorting, cataloguing and storing old clothing makes possible the construction of the new pieces that comprise the brand's upcycled Renew collection. Though the facility is called the "Tiny Factory," the scale of the endeavor — which involves thousands of garments a year — feels anything but small.

Knowing that Eileen Fisher has become a thought leader in the realm of circular design in fashion, inspiring everyone from fledgling sustainable companies to more mainstream designers like [Heron Preston](#), I jumped at the opportunity to take a behind-the-scenes look at what actually goes down at the Tiny Factory. Scroll on to see what I learned.

Upon arriving at the Tiny Factory facility an hour's drive north of New York City, I was met by Carmen Gama, a former [Parsons](#) student who stayed on at Eileen Fisher after completing [a yearlong residency with the brand to learn about sustainability in 2016](#). Since all of the clothing produced in the Tiny Factory starts as secondhand Eileen Fisher garb sent in by customers, sorting out the clothing is the first step.



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista

“The sorting is the most important part of the whole operation to be scalable, because we want to be able to use as many garments as we can in order to be sustainable,” Gama says.

The sorters at the Tiny Factory know the individual textiles the company uses so well that they can often sort them by touch alone — a useful skill for speeding up a process that could be somewhat daunting considering that the brand has collected over a million garments since it started collecting old clothing in 2009.

“They have to be as knowledgeable as the buying team about the fabrics, the damages, the inconsistencies,” says Gama. Clothing is sorted by season, style and the type of laundering required, before being washed.



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista

Clothing that's in like-new condition is set aside after washing to be sold through Eileen Fisher's secondhand program, and garments that are in near-perfect condition are mended to be sold as-is. According to Gama, about 50 percent of the clothing that the brand receives is in perfect condition when received. A set system of pricing and labels makes prepping pre-owned Eileen Fisher pieces for re-sale a quick process.



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista

The Tiny Factory actually has its own mini store on-site, where customers can come shop for secondhand Eileen Fisher pieces at accessible prices. The pre-owned pieces are also sold [online](#).



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista

Clothing that cannot be mended or sold as-is gets catalogued, bundled up and stored in bags sorted by material and color. Part of the genius behind the Tiny Factory system is an extensive database that makes it possible for Eileen Fisher's designers to know how many of any given item — say, light blue cashmere sweaters — they have on hand. This helps designers like Gama figure out what they have to work with when thinking about the next collection.



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista

"I go into our Excel spreadsheet and find out we have about 2,000 pairs of jeans and go, 'What can I do with them?' I start pulling those garments, and then I use existing Eileen Fisher patterns and rework them."



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista

After sorting and washing comes the process of "laying out."

"Once we figure out what it takes to produce one new pattern after deconstructing the original garment, we lay out all those garments and then you put the pattern on top and then cut," Gama explains.

Gama shows how paneling from multiple pairs of pants come together to make one denim tunic top. As head of the Renew design team, Gama is in constant communication with designers from Eileen Fisher's main lines. She looks for ways to use the secondhand garments she has on hand to create new pieces that will feel visually connected to the main collection offerings.



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista

Paper patterns are tacked to old garments, which are cut and stacked so that they can be passed along to the seamstresses who will assemble them into new pieces of clothing.



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista

Even small scraps that come out of the cutting process are saved rather than tossed, in case the team can find a way to use them.

"We hoard everything," Gama says. "We don't throw anything out. We keep all our zippers and buttons. The buttons for the Spring 2018 collection currently in the store in Soho were taken from the same shirts we took apart to make them."



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista

In this case, the tiniest scraps are being bundled together to create silk "beads" that can then be made into colorful necklaces. Despite the crafty nature of the work, it's about as far from a one-woman Etsy gig as can be — every single action for a new product like these accessories is timed to see if it's actually feasible to produce on a scale large enough to merit inclusion in a collection.



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista

"We need to know how long it takes to create every step of the operation so that we can know how much it costs to make," Gama explains.



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista

Seamstresses receive the cut pieces and assemble them into their final form.

Gama runs her hands over a finished piece of fabric made by piecing together numerous similar but not-quite-identical blues. This fabric is destined to become a kimono coat in the brand's Fall 2019 collection.

When the Renew collection is done, it's sent off to retail settings

like the Eileen Fisher Lab Store in Irvington, not far from the factory, where the remade pieces will be sold alongside the main collection.



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista

Overall, what the Eileen Fisher team has accomplished at the Tiny Factory is impressive — but with the right amount of commitment, it's not impossible for other brands to replicate in their own way. If they do, maybe the circular economy will be less of a sustainability pipe dream than a taken-for-granted reality in years to come.



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista



Photo: Whitney Bauck/Fashionista



FACTORY TOUR: SAITEX USA IS SETTING A NEW STANDARD FOR DENIM PRODUCTION IN LOS ANGELES

Using the most high-tech machinery available, this smaller version of Saitex's Vietnam facility makes jeans for Everlane and other brands that prioritize sustainability.

DHANI MAU

Image Credit: Imaxtree

When [Everlane launched denim in 2017](#), it was a pretty big deal. Though the brand had been selling its ethically-made, affordable, minimal basics online for six years by then, its sustainable ethos and direct-to-consumer business model were still novel; consumers and industry professionals alike were eager to watch the innovative company's every move. Its expansion into denim — which is famously expensive, wasteful and polluting to manufacture — was no exception.

Somehow, Everlane managed to launch a collection of jeans for only \$68 a pair with minimal environmental impact. That news put its factory, Vietnam's Saitex, on the map.

Founded in 2012 by Sanjeev Bahl and now commonly referred to as the “cleanest denim factory in the world,” Saitex is famous for its water recycling system and renewable energy sources (among other exceptionally efficient technology), as well as its laundry list of [ethics-centric certifications](#), including [B Corp](#), Fair Trade, LEED and Bluesign. Its vertically-integrated facilities now spread across 22 cubic acres in Ho Chi Minh City, mass-producing denim for Everlane, Madewell, J.Crew, SilvrLake, Mara Hoffman and many more. In 2021, Saitex opened its first factory outside of Vietnam in — where else? — Los Angeles, the unofficial heart of the American denim industry.

Even as most U.S. apparel manufacturing has moved overseas, there's still denim being produced in and around downtown L.A. ([Citizens of Humanity](#) and AG, for instance, operate their own facilities.) But Saitex is the first of its kind here in many ways: It's the only vertically-integrated factory servicing multiple brands, the only factory using 98% recycled water and the only factory with robot sprayers. (More on those later.)

Five years after Everlane debuted denim, its commitment to environmental responsibility can almost be seen as simply a modern way of doing business, rather than some revolutionary concept. In the same spirit, Saitex boasts less about sustainability than it does its truly state-of-the-art, futuristic, automated machinery, much of which can't be found



Inside Saitex USA. Photo: Courtesy of Saitex

anywhere else in the country and equates to unparalleled efficiency. It's, simply, a modern way of making denim.

"Blindsided" by the pandemic and unable to bring in anyone from Vietnam due to travel restrictions, Saitex's USA President Kathy Kweon spent all of 2020 turning a "dark, dirty, tired warehouse" into a bright, modern facility using plans provided by a Vietnam-based team who "don't know anything about L.A. regulations."

"It was literally a few of us contacting local contractors, the city, gas, electric... It was a process," she says.

There are a few key differences between the L.A. and Vietnam factories. The biggest is size. L.A.'s 52,000 square feet, 200 employee and 1,200-pieces-per-day production capacity might sound huge, but it's really a "miniature" version, as Kweon puts it, of Vietnam's multiple facilities employing more than 4,500 people and producing over 20,000 pairs of jeans per day.

Already, though, Saitex USA has expanded into a 10,000-square-foot space across the street to house its fabric, some of which comes from Saitex's own mill in Vietnam, which opened earlier this year.



Saitex USA President Kathy Kweon and Saitex Founder and CEO Sanjeev Bahl. Photo: Courtesy of Saitex



Jeans being quality checked at Saitex USA. Photo: Dhani Mau/Fashionista

Everlane was one of the first brands to transfer some of its production over from Vietnam to the new facility. In July, the brand launched a "made in L.A." denim capsule. Larger brands like Everlane and Madewell can use the L.A. factory to produce limited-run offerings like this with a fast turnaround, while continuing to have larger quantities produced in Vietnam. Or, they can test a new style with a small, locally-made run and then scale it up in Vietnam if it performs well. The USA factory is also suitable for independent brands with smaller distribution; those that want to develop samples without having to travel between separate facilities for fabric, cutting, sewing, washing and finishing; and those that simply want to say their denim is made in the U.S. (Saitex also manufactures its own brand, Edwin USA.)

Both factories have in-house water recycling and use 98% recycled water, but due to differing regulations, L.A.'s water isn't quite clean enough to drink post-laundry. (Legend has it, Vietnam's is, and Bahl is still alive to prove it.) Also, due to the facility's construction, jeans can't be hung to air dry in L.A. the way they can in Vietnam.



Laser-cut and -faded pieces for Everlane shorts, ready to be sewn together. Photo: Dhani Mau/Fashionista

Raw denim typically begins its journey through the factory at one of the two SEI laser machines (the only two like it in the world). On a connected computer, an employee simply programs the specifications for the style being produced during that run, and with the press of a button, lasers cut large swaths of fabric into 14 to 18 perfect pieces that together make up a pair of jeans. (These lasers can also add fading details and other designs, like the "Everlane Los Angeles" printed onto the waistbands of the brand's L.A. capsule.) There's also a hand-cutting station for clients who prefer a more traditional approach. As Kweon puts it: "A lot of L.A., they're not really familiar with the automated machines that are brand-new, so we have to provide the hybrid type of work." These pieces then make their way down a production line, where they pass through 45 to 55 stations, each one operated by someone who specializes in that specific maneuver — i.e. joining the flies or attaching the back pockets — until the waistband is attached and the hems are done. The assembled pair of jeans is checked for quality and consistency, and waits to be treated and washed.

Meanwhile, a second production line handles all non-jean construction: denim jackets, shirts, dresses and so on.

Another section of the facility handles sample-making. There, instead of a production line, one person takes ownership of the entire process.

When it comes to making denim, it's all about the laundry. That's where jeans get their hue or "wash." It's how they become soft. And, traditionally, it's where thousands of gallons of water are mixed with toxic chemicals and sent right down the drain — repeatedly.

By investing in the newest machinery, Saitex has made this process more efficient in more ways than one. While most facilities separate laundry from sewing and other operations, Saitex does it all on the same floor; it's able to do this in part because its process is so much cleaner and more efficient than most.

Instead of the three separate machines for stone washing, chemical treating and ozone cleaning that traditional facilities use, Saitex is living in 2032 with its three-in-one machine that combines all three steps into one drum that can wash up to 250 pairs of jeans at a time in two to four hours. It saves water, labor, time and chemicals.

Saitex also invests in safer, Bluesign-approved alternatives to the toxic chemicals used in traditional denim manufacturing, which is one reason it's able to safely house its laundry inside the main factory. Another is the way the water recycling system is set up, which is impressive even to an industry veteran like Kweon.

"In traditional laundries, all this equipment has to stay outside because it's a very bad odor," she says. "I've never seen this type of equipment prior to this place; we have everything inside, and you don't smell anything because of the chemical system we have."

One of the biggest challenges in opening the factory was getting permits for the water recycling system, simply because it hadn't been done before.

"The city didn't believe us in the beginning," says Kweon. "They had never heard of it, never seen it."



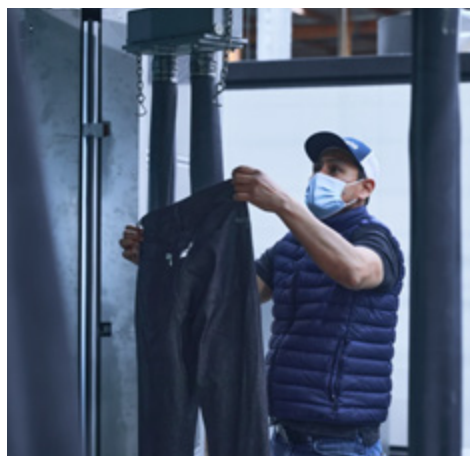
A modernized sewing machine for pockets.



Sludge. Photo: Dhani Mau/Fashionista



This Jeanologia machine separates water from "sludge." Cleaned water is housed in a large tank. Photo: Courtesy of Saitex



An employee places raw jeans on an automated machine. Photo: Courtesy of Saitex

The washing machines are all connected to a drain where the remnants enter another machine that automatically separates the water from the blue "sludge" (which is basically what it sounds like). The water is then filtered again before it travels through the water-cleaning system just underground. The cleaned water is then stored in a large tank for its next use. The tank is replaced with fresh water only once a month; the filter is cleaned every Sunday. Leftover "sludge" is dried, compacted and sent to a recycling facility. (At the Vietnam factory, which produces a lot more sludge, it's upcycled into insulation.) Since air drying isn't possible, Saitex USA uses highly energy-efficient dryers.

While some styles go straight from sewing to washing to drying, others may require additional steps in between, which is where some of the factory's most mind-boggling machinery comes into play. Detail work that would traditionally be done by hand is automated; many involve an apparatus that comprises two long, straight balloons that inflate to fill out a pair of jeans.

A grinding machine takes the place of someone manually rubbing fabric with sandpaper to add distressing; it can be programmed to grind with the desired intensity. A 3-D machine can be used after a base wash to put creases into jeans for a lasting, three-dimensional whiskering effect; the "creased" jeans are then put into an oven that effectively bakes in the whisker.

I was most impressed by the "automated robot machine," as Kweon calls it: One time-honored method of denim fading involves strategically hand-spraying a chemical onto specified parts of the jeans — but this machine automates that process for multiple pairs at once.

Jeans are placed onto the aforementioned "balloons" on the outside of the machine and are then rotated inside like a merry-go-round. There, a series of robot arms do the spraying. Not only are these robots programmed to achieve the client's desired effect, there's also an AI function wherein a human deemed to be the

“best sprayer” is recorded in a separate machine, and that information is used to program the robot so that it uses the exact same spraying technique.

After washing and drying, jeans head to the finishing area for labels, tags, more quality checks and pressing — they can be de-wrinkled almost instantly by an automated steamer machine — before being packaged and prepared to ship.

At the end of my tour, it wasn't some exceptional devotion to sustainability that left the biggest impression: I was most taken aback by all the futuristic, incredibly efficient technology — both its existence, of which I had no idea, and Saitex's investment in it. Instead of preaching some altruistic rhetoric about saving the planet, Saitex prefers to lead by example, showing the industry what a modern supply chain can look like.

“We don't highlight too much about sustainability because we feel like that's a must for everybody,” says Kweon.

While this way of manufacturing should be standard, it would be prohibitively expensive for most existing factories to get on Saitex's level.

“Smaller factories, even if they want to advance, the machines are very expensive,” she says. And Saitex can only produce so much in its small-ish, continuously-booked U.S. location. While nothing's been confirmed, it feels safe to expect that expansion is on the horizon.

“To scale,” Kweon says, “we need to be bigger.”



The robot sprayer machine. Photo: Dhani Mau/Fashionista



Inside the robot machine. Photo: Courtesy of Saitex