

IN ASSOCIATION WITH ALLBIRDS



THE FUTURE
OF
SUSTAINABLE
FASHION

The tide is turning for eco-friendly fashion labels. What's next for sartorial sustainability? *Stylist* investigates...

Whether it's skipping a straw in your evening cocktail or choosing to cycle into work, we're all waking up to the urgent need for change when it comes to our collective carbon footprint. And the fashion industry is no exception.

The world consumes around 80 billion items of new clothing every year – that's 400% more than just 20 years ago. The environmental impact of our fast-fashion fixation is staggering. Aside from creating a mounting waste problem (235 million items were turfed into landfill last year in the UK alone), the fashion industry is now the second biggest consumer of water and the second largest polluter of clean water. It also generates more greenhouse gas emissions and uses more energy than all international flights and shipping combined.

The industry is responding to this with major innovation in the world of sustainable fashion, with plenty of brands making waves. For example, H&M announced last year that it plans to only use recycled materials or sustainably sourced materials in its clothing by 2030, while fashion house Burberry has recently invested £3 million in a sustainable materials research programme. All the while, new players are entering the market with long-term goals that demonstrate sustainable fashion isn't just a passing trend. Green is very much the new black.

Here's what we'll be seeing more of in the future when it comes to fashion...

Sustainable fabrics

It's no secret that some manmade fibres such as viscose are bad news for the environment, but you can't go wrong with natural cotton, right? Wrong, unfortunately. Producing cotton requires huge volumes of fresh water – up to 10,000 litres for just one kilogram of material – which is a major problem in areas where water is becoming increasingly scarce.

But there are alternatives to traditional fabrics available, and they're rapidly being adopted by brands looking to make a big dent in their environmental footprint. Sustainable footwear brand Allbirds, for example, uses a mesh fabric derived from eucalyptus tree fibres for its trainers. The material is sourced from South African farms that rely on rainfall, not irrigation, and use 95% less water than cotton to produce.

"Allbirds uses a mesh fabric derived from eucalyptus tree fibres for its trainers"

In fact, there's now an entire range of viable alternatives to traditional materials. Allbirds developed a sugarcane-based foam that will be incorporated into the soles of its trainers, and superfine (and silky) Merino wool for the uppers, which takes 60% less energy to manufacture than the materials in synthetic trainers. The company also recycles plastic bottles for its laces, castor bean oil for its insoles and recycled



cardboard for all of its packaging. The company uses natural and renewable materials, so its products have a minimal impact on the planet.

Naturally sourced and recycled materials will play a major role in the future of fashion – you can expect your wardrobe to include everything ranging from 'pineapple leather' to fabrics made from bacteria (yes, really). The V&A Museum recently demonstrated what was possible earlier this year with its exhibition Fashioned From Nature, which showcased a range of disruptive technologies that are set to transform the clothes industry, such as biomaterials grown from plant roots and vegan silk made from yeast – and even materials made from fungi.

Traceability of clothing

Just as the food sector has seen a major uptick in consumer interest in the provenance of its produce, so too has the fashion industry in the origin of its clothing – especially after the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013, which cost the lives of 1,138 people in Bangladesh.

As Fashion Revolution founder Orsola de Castro observed at this year's Copenhagen Fashion Summit: "Transparency is the first step towards a different culture; one where brands become open and accountable, and customers are ready to become vigilant and ask, 'Who made my clothes?'"

As such, a number of pioneering fashion brands are putting traceability at the heart of their operations. UK company Birdsong knows the names of every single maker that produce their clothes ("And they come around the house for tea," adds brand manager, Sophie Slater). Luxury group Kering has recently introduced an organic cotton that is "100% scientifically traceable" to ensure best farming practices, while T-shirt brand Rapanui has comprehensive traceability maps on its website, giving details on everything from fabrics and manufacturing to energy use and transport for every item it sells.

"We've proved the concept that consumers, once empowered, do make the right choice," the company says. "Our best, cleanest products

"Naturally sourced materials are the future of fashion"

have seen sales rise while we have been forced to discontinue any products made from less sustainable materials or less clear provenance,



as sales dropped. The mechanism works." And you can bet that if there's a financial advantage as well as an environmental one, traceability will be high on the agenda for many brands.

Make do and mend

Of course, the most effective way to limit the environmental impact of clothing is to simply stop producing it at such an enormous volume, especially when millions of tons of items that end up in landfill are perfectly reusable.

So, some brands have started return and repair incentive schemes. Donate an item of M&S-labelled clothing to Oxfam, for example, and you'll receive a £5-off voucher when you spend £35 in M&S stores. Likewise, Patagonia has partnered with online reseller Yerdle to launch the website Worn Wear; you return unwanted clothes in exchange for credit, and they're sold on for a reduced price. Meanwhile, German label Silfir will repair your purchase for free, and once it's beyond repair, they'll take it back for recycling and reward you with a voucher.

In fact, DIY tailoring is growing. Once upon a time, visible mending (darning, stitching and the like) wasn't the 'done' thing. Now it's being embraced by sustainably minded fashionistas as a 'badge of honour'. As Kate Sekules says on her website visiblemending.com, "Any mend is great, and making it visible adds meaning". Like the beautiful Japanese art of Kintsugi, where broken pottery is fixed with powdered gold, repairing clothes in an obvious way creates "a story told in thread", adds Sekules. "One that tells the world, 'I care, I tend, I value, I mend.'"

So, next time you find a hole in your favourite jumper, get a needle and thread out and make a fashion statement the planet will thank you for.

For more on Allbirds and its range of revolutionary trainers, visit allbirds.co.uk

allbirds