

It's not easy being green

As *'The Incredible Hulk'* hits screens, Fiona Harkin looks at what going green really means

Recently, fashion has developed a very fashionable conscience. The current environmentally minded zeitgeist is permeating the industry, and its once hairy-hemp image is now nothing but a ghost of fashion's hippie past. In its place are "eco-luxe" and "eco-chic" and a stylish array of environmentally friendly and ethical alternatives to mainstream fashion. But just how deep does the greening of fashion go? Beyond sustainability, the green movement marks a paradigm shift among consumers towards the need for a more valuable product – which should be music to the ears of the luxury sector.

But in an industry that thrives on newness, what will next season's trend be? A backlash in favour of all things artificial and plastic – a nu-syntheticism? Call us cynical, but right now fashion is at risk of being greenwashed: subject to a superficial treatment that will bleed out in the next cycle of fashion seasons before it has a chance to become fixed. The result will be considerable consumer confusion – and *ennui*.

A case in point is the recent ban issued by the UK's Advertising Standards Authority on a campaign for the US Cotton Council, which ran the tagline, "Soft, sensual and sustainable, it's Cotton USA!" The ASA's bugbear was the use of the word sustainable. It said that cotton's reputation for being a water-intensive crop requiring heavy use of pesticides – not to mention the effect on the developing world of US cotton subsidies – has led to a "significant division of

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informed opinion as to whether cotton production in the US could be described as sustainable". Sustainability, the ASA said, lacked an agreed definition and would prove to be ambiguous to consumers.

It's a fashion paradox: without merely paying lip service to the eco movement, how can such a fast-paced industry maintain the green momentum and achieve true sustainability?

"In a few years there'll be a lot of backlash against some of the green brands. I already feel it now," says London-based Canadian Timothy Han of the eponymous cult bath and body company. "I know a lot of people who feel like it has really been rammed down their throats and they don't want to deal with it any more." This is partly due to an issue Han refers to as "keeping up with the green Joneses": the rise of an increasingly divided consumer, overwhelmed by choice, whose beliefs and intentions don't always match their buying habits.

Han, together with luxury lingerie label Eco-Boudoir, jeweller Pippa Small and boutique travel agency Nature & Kind, have banded together as an informal group of sustainably minded companies set on proving a green lifestyle does have longevity. "My philosophy is 'sustainable luxury'. My products don't have 'eco' written all over them because, ultimately, customers will buy them because they like the smell," says Han. It's an added value philosophy, acknowledging that the product comes first and – as a "by the way" – it's also environmentally sound too. "I want it to last," says Han. "That's why I'm not marketing it as 'green'."

Jenny White of Eco-Boudoir believes her sensuous lingerie and home products, sold at Harrods, need explanation – hence the overtly "green" name. "I felt



Shift From left: YSL, Givenchy, Rogan at New York's Future Fashion show in February

like I needed to explain that our products are eco-friendly, because they have always been very luxuriously designed and you can't tell by looking at them," says the former textiles student.

"It's quite promising, the shift that is ongoing at the moment, as large luxury firms decide to redouble their efforts on this agenda," says Jem Bendell, co-author of the World Wide Fund for Nature's recent report on the industry, "Deeper Luxury". New York store Barneys is one such company. Its Barneys Green project has been an ongoing commitment involving a Green Holiday campaign for Christmas, sponsorship of February's Future Fashion Show at New York fashion week, which highlighted 30 high-end designers making sustainable looks, and previewing Rogan, designer Rogan Gregory's new organic collection for US retailer Target. But does its somewhat gimmicky in-store T-shirt recycling programme done in conjunction with cotton brand Loomstate really mark a deeper shift?

Barneys' senior vice-president and fashion director Julie Gilhart is frank about the company's approach, which she says is to "go slow and stay committed".

"It is a retail philosophy that harkens to our own values at Barneys," says Gilhart. "Sometimes it is hard to adhere to it in this age of 'fast fashion', but it is a methodology that is good to apply to the eco-movement in fashion. One of the biggest issues is education of the customer. It is teaching them a new language, and that takes time."

Essentially, the green movement's momentum is based on how much it matters to the fashion consumer. Some 61 per cent of Britons now consider ethical issues when shopping, according to a recent survey released by the Co-operative Bank, and more than a fifth of consumers keep ethical factors in mind when purchasing cosmetics (25 per cent) and clothing (21 per cent). This is due in part to improved quality and style. "Now people buy a green product because it's actually really beautiful and because they really want it," says ethical jeweller Pippa Small, who works with small communities across the globe, not to help them make her jewellery, but to help them make their own.

Recent TV documentaries in the UK, like the BBC's *Blood, Sweat and T-Shirts*, which placed six young fashion addicts in Indian factories to make clothes for the British high street, and Channel 4's *The Devil Wears Primark*, which was pulled at the last minute, are also changing attitudes.

As the consumer becomes more aware of the production process, price may no longer be the overriding factor in purchases. This may be at odds with the global effect of the US credit crunch and a widespread tightening of purse strings, but ultimately it is consumer resistance that is driving the "eco" movement, with individuals exercising their autonomy and rebelling against throwaway culture and globalisation. Underlying this is a renewed focus on products of a lasting quality – ones with a deeper value that may not always be overtly eco, but are nevertheless more considered.

In the current economic climate, Barney's Gilhart says that sustainable fashion "is the future. I like to think of it as the 'new cool'." However, the question is, in 10 years, will it also be the "old cool", or will it have shed the temporal label and become, simply, cool?

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