

Never Look at Clothes the Same Way Again

Andrea Newell

Consider how many people there are in the world (the world population [clock](#) currently puts it at 7.4 billion). Then, think about their clothes. How many articles of clothing does each person have? Some have more, some have less, but even if each person averaged just 5 items, that would be 37 billion articles of clothing.

In 2015, Holly McQuillan, senior lecturer at Ngā Pae Māhutonga – the School of Design, [estimated](#) that the fashion industry would produce 400 billion meters of fabric in that year.

That amount of fabric would cover the whole state of California. Fifteen percent (60 billion meters) is generally wasted during the production phase, before the garments are even finished, shipped and sold. The number of garments created each year is the same as each person in the world (all 7.4 billion) having 20 new items. Every year. And it keeps growing.

Fashion, by its nature, encourages high turnover in the pursuit of being trendy. This constant apparel replacement that promotes poor quality, low-cost garments is called [fast fashion](#).

Grist created an [excellent video](#) illustrating why buying an \$8 shirt is a bad idea.

This endless cycle of production and consumption keeps spinning faster and faster, fueling the industry's growth and increasing the impact on both people and environment.

The fashion industry is [second only](#) to the oil industry for pollution. Agriculture is one of the largest sources of pollution in many countries, and although cotton occupies 2.4% of global crop land, it is [responsible](#) for 24% of the world's insecticide and 11% of its pesticide sales. Those chemicals impact the workers in the fields and contaminate the water when they enter the ground.

Each garment also takes huge amounts of water and energy to make. The NRDC estimates that each ton of cotton fabric (used for jeans and t-shirts) consumes [200 tons](#) of water during the production process – before it is shipped around the world to its retail destination, then taken home by customers to be washed over and over again, using even more water and energy. And then it is discarded or donated, although only about [10% of donated items](#) are actually resold.

On top of the environmental cost is a human one. The producers of the movie [The True Cost](#) (2015) estimate that 1 in 6 people alive in the world today work in some aspect of the fashion industry.

“It is the most labor-dependent industry on Earth.”

Because people expect to buy an \$8 shirt, the real cost of that shirt lies in low wages, dangerous working conditions and misery brought on by immense pressure from brands to churn out product for the lowest cost.

Some brands in the industry are trying to move toward a more sustainable process and there are many steps along the way where things can get better. And after brands put in their effort, on the tail end of the lifecycle, it

is up to customers to lessen the apparel impact through their buying choices, their garment care and what they do with garments at the end of their usefulness.

Better by Design

The first place to start is at the beginning.

Many design programs are incorporating sustainability into their programs and encouraging designers to consider the entire lifecycle of the garment and make better choices in the design phase. In the past, many designers, especially those that worked for big brands, couldn't see past their own phase of the process to realize how their decisions impacted the rest of the process.

Better choices in fabric, Holly says, can lead to longer garment life and more choices for recycling and reuse. Better choices of zippers and buttons that can be removed can also help garments be disposed of with less waste. Garments made of natural fibers can more easily be recycled, while blended fabrics are more difficult to renew at the end of their useful life.

Better Irrigation for Thirsty Crops

Cotton is used to make about [half](#) of the fabric used in apparel and other textiles annually (the rest are synthetic). The global cotton crop produces around 20 million tons of cotton every year.

Cotton farmers are continually working toward more sustainable practices that conserve water and energy during the growing process. The problem is, cotton is a very thirsty crop and there is no getting around that. Cotton is also grown in 90 countries around the world, and each area presents its own challenges so solutions for farmers in different regions must be customized to their unique problems.

Cotton farmers that live in a region with adequate rainfall can many times rely on that, rather than intense irrigation, but often they face persistent pests leading to dangerous pesticide use. For these farmers, new methods like introducing predator pests to eliminate the cotton eaters can be a way of limiting insecticide and pesticide use.

Other farmers that live in arid areas are forced to use irrigation ([73%](#) of the global cotton crop is grown on irrigated land) but have fewer pests and use less pesticides. In those cases they can install targeted irrigation systems that use technology to detect which areas of the field are already wet, and only water the driest parts, rather than spraying the entire field that may not need it and wasting water.

Organizations like CottonConnect and the Better Cotton Initiative focus on promoting sustainable cotton production by improving each part of the process as much as they can. Since solutions like targeted irrigation cost money, and many farmers are unable to afford to make changes, these organizations work to help farmers finance lower-water solutions.

“These new irrigation systems can increase yields by 30 percent and reduce water usage by up to 60 percent,” according to Leslie Johnson, executive director of the C&A Foundation, an organization that champions organic cotton production.

Effective drip irrigation increases crop yield because the crop isn't dependent on rainfall, so it matures faster and results in a better return on investment for farmers.

Wiser Water Use in Production

Brands like Levi's have worked to [change their processes](#) and use less water during production. The company estimates that their Water<Less™ jeans process has saved one billion gallons of water since they launched it in 2011.

Several companies are also concentrating on improving the dyeing processes to use less water and less harmful chemical dyes, since dye also [contaminates water](#). After dye is used to color fabric and is washed down the drain, it damages groundwater, lakes, rivers and streams. Throughout developing countries that rely heavily on the apparel industry are cancers, birth defects and terminal illnesses as a result of the people drinking groundwater poisoned by chemicals used for dyeing.

AirDye and DyeCoo focus on [dye processes](#) for polyester and have succeeded in greatly reducing water and energy rates, greenhouse gas emissions and chemical use. AirDye reports using 95% less water, 86% less energy and 84% less greenhouse gas production. DyeCoo's process uses zero water and 50% less energy and chemicals compared to traditional dyeing methods. Cotton can be difficult to dye, but ColorZen's cotton dyeing process uses 90% less water, 75% less energy, 95% less chemicals, and results in zero toxic discharge.

Why don't all brands use these dyeing processes? Cost. Consumers need to invest in paying more for garments that do less harm to people and planet before brands will see the benefit of producing more sustainably-made items. The current demand for inexpensive apparel can't sustain better dyeing processes.

Consumers have been placing a higher value on health and the environment by supporting more environmentally-conscious companies in recent years. However, the same consumer concern has not measurably impacted the apparel industry yet.



Better Wages, Better Working Conditions, Better Lives

The rise of technology has led to lightning-fast manufacturing processes that produce computer chips, car engines, computers and cell phones. Automation far outpaces worker efficiency in many processes.

What can't technology do? It can't sew a shirt. It can't stitch a pair of jeans. (At least, not yet.)

It's easy to forget that garments are still made almost entirely by hand. So when stores sell \$8 shirts, it's easy to get sucked in by the lure of low cost. But, looking at the apparel production process as a whole, it's impossible to see how an \$8 shirt could cover production and transportation costs, allow a living wage for workers, and also turn a profit for a brand.

In *The True Cost*, a garment worker in Bangladesh says, “These clothes are made from our blood.”

And she is not exaggerating. In 2012 and 2013, [three devastating disasters](#) in apparel industry history made international news, including the Rana Plaza collapse that killed 1,100 garment workers and injured 2,500 more. Around the world people were horrified to learn about the unsafe working conditions and abject misery of the garment workers, yet 2012 was the most profitable year in apparel history up until that point.

Workers in Bangladesh are still the [lowest paid](#) garment workers in the world with a monthly minimum wage of \$68, while the minimum wage in China ranges from \$155 to \$321 a month. Wages for garment workers in the U.S. average about \$9 per hour (which at 40 hours a week is about \$1440 a month).

In 2016, minimum wages across Asia [may increase 5% or more](#) due to pressure from labor unions and government minimum wage adjustments. In the U.S., the recent battle for minimum wage increase is impacting garment manufacturer location decisions. As California ramps up to a \$15 an hour livable wage, American Apparel, the biggest clothing maker in Los Angeles, [announced last month](#) that they might move the production of some garments to another manufacturer in the U.S. (read: with a lower minimum wage rate) and at the same time cut 500 local jobs. The garment industry in LA has shrunk by 33% in the past decade, while wages have increased by 17 percent.

However, some smaller labels have [gained ground](#) in the U.S. – even in California, paying a living wage and using sustainable materials and processes. CA-based Nature USA manufactures premium products for customers like REI and Patagonia. Started in 1996, it was a small company for a decade but began to boom after brands began to focus on sustainability and offer products made from organic cotton. In the past three years the company has seen double-digit growth even as its employees make an average of \$13-14 per hour.

At the other end of the country, Yogasmogas founder Rishi Bali was [inspired](#) to keep the company’s manufacturing local so he could closely oversee the exact specifications for the company’s technical fabric, monitor quality control and have the flexibility to grow as business thrived. Bali told Fast Company, “I simply couldn’t produce the clothes I wanted to make overseas.” And despite the hype about the pressure for quick turnaround on brand orders in factories in China, Bali says that he can meet even shorter deadlines by keeping his business in the U.S.

Better Buying Decisions

Designers, brands and suppliers have many places in the process to make improvements, but customers can also play a big part in helping the apparel industry change.

Fashion has never been cheaper than it is right now. As the cost of living continues to rise, somehow there are still \$8 t-shirts and \$20 jeans. Some fashion bloggers still [promote](#) shopping at fast fashion giants like H&M and Forever 21 because, well, the price, of course. If customers can save money, they can *buy more*. And that’s the core of the problem.

It’s hard to make the argument that people should buy more expensive clothes. Everyone is on a budget, which makes inexpensive clothes so attractive.

How can this cycle be broken? By taking some inspiration from Audrey Hepburn.



Clothes were traditionally well-made, the U.S. garment industry was regulated and workers were fairly compensated up through the 1950s. Additionally, clothes could be mended and lasted longer, and customers bought fewer, higher-quality items. The 1960s brought the beginning of the faster design cycle as well as disposable garments (literally, dresses made of paper designed to be discarded after a single use). Fast fashion was born and has thrived ever since.

If customers could go back to that mindset, change their habits and invest in fewer classic, quality garments that last, it could slow the cycle. One fashion blogger, Marc Bain, [says](#) that “your next item of clothing should be so expensive it hurts.” His personal minimum is \$150, a high-enough amount that it causes him to really spend some time thinking about whether he really needs the item or not. It also ensures that he cannot buy very many items at that price, and the garments are of higher quality. Can everyone afford that price-point? Of course not, but Bain’s point is that if consumers set a threshold that works for them, it would inspire fewer, more considered choices.

Regardless, consumers all need to buy less (and millennials are definitely [leading the way there](#)). Brands like [Patagonia](#) have even gone so far as to encourage customers to repair their garments rather than buy new. Garments that are better made can hold up to long use and repeated repairs.

A way consumers can be more aware of their garment’s materials, quality of construction and journey is to find out where their clothes come from. Patagonia shows their process through their Footprint Chronicles. Timberland has ecolabels (like the label on food items) that dissect all the materials in their garments and shoes.

U.S.-based organic cotton t-shirt company TS Designs has a website called [Where Your Clothing](#) where its customers can look up their garment’s journey “from dirt to shirt,” president Eric Henry says. The company has a close relationship with their North Carolina, third-generation cotton farmer (who grows his crop relying only on rainfall) and pays a living wage to its workers up and down the supply chain (which is contained within 600 miles).

However, TS Designs does not sell \$8 shirts – their prices range from \$22 to \$30. Patagonia’s Nature USA-made t-shirts retail for \$29, while Old Navy’s fast fashion t-shirts are priced from \$8.97 to \$14.97.

Knowing all that, will customers spend the additional money? More and more indie clothing lines are cropping up in the U.S., but their prices, which reflect significant time and effort, can seem high. But considering the price people and the planet are paying to manufacture billions of these clothing items, paying a few dollars more for fewer, better-made garments could have a big impact.

Whether it's an \$8 or \$28 shirt, another way to conserve resources is to wash items less, use cooler water and line dry whenever possible to use less water and energy and extend the life of the garment.



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Take another look at that crowded clothes rack at the mall. Imagine the water, energy, chemicals, labor and transportation invested in only one of those items. Then look at the price tag. After peering behind the fast fashion curtain and seeing the human and environmental cost of cheap garments, clothes will never look the same again.

Take Action:

- Watch: [The Story of Solutions](#)
- Watch: [The Story of Change](#)
- Take the Quiz: [What Kind of Changemaker are You?](#)

Information and quotes in this article came from interviews, published articles from [Business Insider](#), [Bust](#), [Ecowatch](#), [Fast Company](#), [Forbes](#), [Grist](#), [The Guardian](#), [LA Times](#), [Pop Sugar](#), [Quartz](#), [Think Progress](#), [Triple Pundit](#), the [More Crop for Your Drop](#) report and from the film, [The True Cost](#).

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