

# What Should I Wear?

by Bernadette Vallely

Until the recent upsurge in discussion of green issues, most of us gave little thought to any of the global consequences of our choice of clothes. We bought the right T-shirts for good causes and we avoided (if we could) synthetic materials in favor of "natural" fibres like cotton and wool. But we now know that practically all clothes have environmental consequences.

Short of wearing nothing at all, we do have to make choices about clothes. For women, clothing is presented as the key to fashion, beauty and style. Feminists have, of course, explored issues around clothing and what it is supposed to mean in terms of our "femininity". But we have not had much discussion of the technology involved.

The clothing and fashion industry process includes most of the crop-growing, harvesting, processing, machining, finishing, packaging, modelling and selling of clothes. Women in developing countries are particularly exploited in the clothing business as costs are cut to the bare bones in a highly competitive industry. Ethnic minority women in countries like Britain are also involved, often as outworkers earning incredibly small incomes for their work. We too often

forget that sweated labour underlies practically the whole of the rag trade and therefore the clothes we wear.

Fabrics are the key to the environmental impact of our clothing choices. Take cotton, for instance, a natural fibre and the most popular choice of consumers in the UK. Cotton occupies five percent of all the world's productive land as a cash crop grown mainly for export by many Third World countries to generate foreign currency.

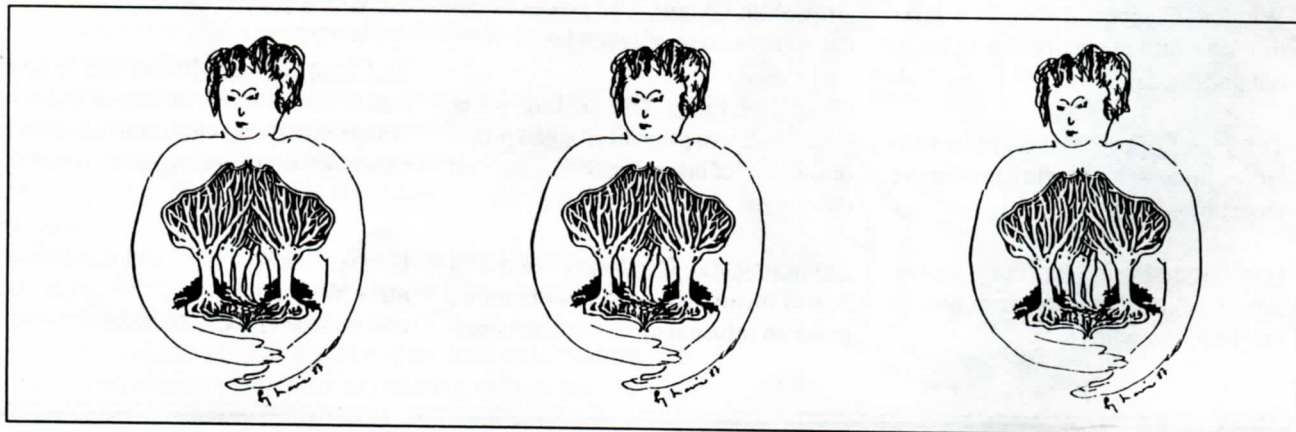
Cotton is an extremely difficult crop to grow. The boll weevil, its most dangerous pest, takes only five days to reproduce and can destroy entire crops quickly. The pink vole worm, the cotton mouse, white fly and root rot are all common pests associated with growing cotton. They are generally controlled by using large quantities of pesticide. A wide variety of poisons are used. They include: Aldicarb, Aldrin, Carbaryl, Carbufofan, Dimethoate, Mancozeb, Paraquat, Ethyl Parathion, Pirimicarb and Trifluraline.

We use enormous amounts of cotton in our fabrics and for other uses as well, tampons as well as T-shirts. Our increased use of cotton has meant increased and intensified production, with all the environmental problems associated with it. In Egypt, for instance, nearly 30,000 tons of pesticide

are used each year on the cotton crop alone. In Sudan, there have been reports of pesticides contaminating drinking water, and the natural predators of crop pests being destroyed.

Cotton is usually heavily bleached, sometimes to counter the effects of the chemicals used on the plants. The nitrates used for Brazilian cotton make the product turn pink, which means even more chemicals to make it white. The traditional bleach used is chlorine, although less damaging alternatives are now being sought. Look out for unbleached cotton - the Women's Environment Network is selling a T-shirt from a cooperative in Pakistan, and some of the mail order catalogues of ethical products offer unbleached cotton garments.

When we come to synthetic materials, we discover even more environmentally unfriendly chemicals being used. Polyesters, acrylics, viscose and other blends are produced by the petrochemical industry. The problems caused by this start with oil extraction and transport, but do not end there. Petrochemical plants are also major sources of environmental pollution and destruction. The Rhine in Germany, for example, has been heavily polluted by the industry. Steps have had to be taken throughout Europe to





minimize the damage done to wildlife. The industry is huge, and its impact on the environment will last for centuries: production of synthetic fabrics uses about 25,000 barrels of oil a day, and the products could take several centuries to biodegrade.

Both cotton and synthetic fabrics are often finished with formaldehyde resins. These are used to stiffen and strengthen the fabrics to produce crease resistant, no-iron and permanent press materials. The whole process has been under intense scrutiny from environmentalists in other countries recently because formaldehyde causes irritating and allergic reactions in sensitive people. It can affect the eyes, skin, and lungs, and is a suspected carcinogen.

Synthetic thermoplastic fabrics such as nylon, polyester and acrylic cause another set of problems, which are evident when you wear them. Warm weather causes the material to absorb moisture, and makes you feel hotter and stickier. They absorb natural body oils from your skin. They also hold oil-based stains, which cannot be removed unless you use the specially-developed (and environmentally damaging) detergents with enzymes and optical brighteners.

### What we can do

The debate about clothing looks like a big one, and it has only just started. This means that any action we can take -- now -- will help point the way for the future development of the clothing industry towards more environment-friendly products.

❑ We can buy less clothing. One environmentalist, John Button, has estimated that there is 30 billion British pounds (US\$ 50 billion) worth of new

clothes in British drawers and cupboards, unworn.

❑ Don't be a slave to fashion. Every three months new styles are brought out for us to buy. We do less environmental damage if we buy clothes to last and feel comfortable in, not for the latest fashion.

❑ Look for well-made, good quality clothing, if possible. Those cheap clothes fall apart after a few washes. Well-made clothing made from good fabrics lasts longer and probably works out cheaper in the long run.

❑ Recycle your clothes, and buy recycled ones. Take them down to a charity shop if you don't want them. Support your local jumble sale.

❑ Buy washable clothes: dry-cleaning fluids include solvents and other chemicals that destroy the ozone layer and may be harmful to our health. Use environmentally-friendly washing powders and dry your clothes on the line in preference to a dryer. Iron as little as possible, it saves energy.

❑ Mending clothes saves money as well as the environment.

❑ Wearing clothes in natural fabrics that feel comfortable and last well is good for you as well as good for the environment.

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*About the author: Bernadette Vallely is an environmentalist who has written about the many practical ways to save our planet.*

*Source: Women's Environmental Network (WEN), 287 City Road, London EC1 England.*

### Clothes Versus Food

The use of land and water for producing the raw materials for western clothing can conflict with Third World women's need for these same resources to grow food.

Take rayon, for example. It is made from eucalyptus trees, which need over 400 litres of water a day - often taking precious water resources as well as prime land from local agriculture. The manufacture and processing of rayon also causes widespread environmental damage which includes the formation of dioxins, the most dangerous chemical known.

Eucalyptus is very widely grown in South Africa, often on land previously farmed by Africans, and this is the source of much of rayon.

Indonesia is another example. Ten women were jailed there in February 1991 for damaging a eucalyptus plantation owned by Indorayon in the Siaen district of Northern Sumatra. The company owns 25,000 hectares of forest concession, and has been implicated in pollution cases in the region over the last few years. After being sentenced for destroying 16,600 new trees with their hoes, one of the women told the court: "We are prepared to be cut into pieces."

Show your support for their action by writing to the Director of Indorayon at Gedung BNI Lantai 20, Jalan Sudirman Kav. 1, Jakarta Pusat, Indonesia or write WEN or Isis International for more details.