

IT'S WHAT'S INSIDE THAT COUNTS

GreenKnickers, London



Sarah Lucy Smith and Rose Cleary-Southwood on their ethical bicycles (Source: GreenKnickers)

“Eat Organic”, “STOP Deforestation” and “Cycle more” are examples of slogans we read or hear about everyday everywhere, in TV adverts, on billboards, in newspapers, looking to catch people’s attention on environmental issues. Trying to reach hearts and minds about these issues, Sarah Lucy Smith and Rose Cleary-Southwood decided to start a new business designing organic knickers with environmental messages on them.

Sarah Lucy Smith is an underwear designer with a specialty in eco-design and her friend Rose Cleary-Southwood is a fashion merchandiser with a uniquely ethical business mind. Both have a passion for the planet and armed with their fashion sensibilities and an ethical conscience, they set up GreenKnickers, a unique lingerie company.

As part of her merchandise research for GreenKnickers, Sarah stopped women in the street and asked them to flash their undies. “Sometimes people who were dressed really smartly would wear a great big pair of tatty cotton knickers, and women who were wearing really posh suits had outrageous slogans on their pants,” she said in an interview to the Guardian.

She has altered conventional thinking of what underwear should be, with a range of carefully-designed knickers people can wear with pride whilst being respectful of the environment. The underwear, for both women and men, are available in the some eye-popping colours – acidic pinks and sea greens – and are decorated with funny slogans. To colour the eco-knickers, they use SKAL organic approved dyes as well as natural dyes.

In this way, they hope to inspire people to respect their environment and raise awareness on environmental issues. Their interactive pants warn of global warming; as the pigment heats up from the wearer's body heat, the turquoise sea in one design overwhelms the green planet. Others resemble the changing seasons – designed as trees that turn from green to autumnal red, they finally leave just the leaf skeleton.

“We started GreenKnickers to prove that ethical choices can be funny, beautiful and sexy. The logical place to start was obviously knickers!”

Sarah Lucy Smith, GreenKnickers

Sarah and Rose have also thought about the importance of working with sustainable fabrics such as hemp and bamboo, which aren't less damaging to agricultural land as other textile crops. Each pair of GreenKnickers is made from fabrics sourced from non-for-profit women's charities and Fairtrade overseas co-operatives.

Their amazing suppliers include a women's co-op which is using business to build lasting change in their communities through schools, hospitals and opportunities for disabled and disadvantaged women. Their entire cotton supply chain is certified by the Fairtrade Foundation from farming to manufacturing. This guarantees a minimum price and social premium for disadvantaged small-scale cotton farmers so that they can invest in their community and livelihoods. Sarah and Rose consider organic farming to be a large part of the struggle to address issues of exploitation and fairness in the fashion industry.

Hemp satin, a mixture of hemp and silk, has all the softness and luxury of silk with the positive impact and durability of hemp. The use of hemp has enormous advantages from an environmental point of view, as it is considered non-toxic: no pesticides are necessary as insects can't stand the plant! Herbicides are also unnecessary because hemp grows far quicker than any weed. It is considered the ultimate natural fiber because it is a natural fabric which, unlike cotton, can grow practically anywhere – even on otherwise unusable land, where it can help improve the soil.

Bamboo is ultra-absorbent and breathable as well as soft and durable. It's a naturally antibacterial fabric that makes it ideal for allergy-prone skin. Sarah and Rose's bamboo fabric is 100% biodegradable, and is processed using non-toxic agents which are recycled again and again. Its characteristics make it ideal for sport – Sarah uses it to make a range of cycling knickers with removable padding that encourage wearers to reduce their carbon footprint by cycling more.

To minimize environmental impacts and to promote energy savings, Sarah and Rose encourage cold washing, as washing constitutes 85% of the environmental impact of clothing. They also work with local producers to minimize air pollution. For the same reason, their products are sent by post and they ship overseas goods by sea. Moreover, they only use recycled materials for their labels and gift boxes, and they also suggest customers to send boxes back in order to reuse or recycle them.

For Sarah and Rose, setting up a small ethical company is both easier, because they have complete control, and more difficult than normal, because the financial burden of doing things ethically is greater. It can also be more difficult because some Fairtrade-certified suppliers have large minimum orders for small companies.

Starting an ethical business was Sarah and Rose's plan from the very beginning – it is what drives them. Their ethics, which they apply to their personal and professional lives, inform every choice they make. Using this simple ideology has strengthened the business, giving them confidence, belief and nothing to hide. As it's been said about them: “GreenKnickers is a personality – one that is fun, eccentric, sexy and above all, ethical.”

Facts and Information

- Skal is an independent and internationally acknowledged inspection organization for organic production methods, based in the Netherlands.
- Conventional cotton farming is one of agriculture's most environmentally destructive activities. A typical conventional cotton t-shirt uses about 150 grams (about the same as a cup of sugar) of toxic pesticides and insecticides. (*Source: Soil Association*)
- Non-organic cotton is the most widely-used fibre in the clothing industry due to its diversity and cost. Yet the true cost of cotton production includes as many as 3 million poisonings and 20 thousand deaths each year from pesticide use.
- Organic cotton farming methods benefit farmers and their communities by preventing and reducing farmer debt; improving food stability for farmers as a result of crop rotation; preventing pollution of the water table; preventing potential fatal pesticide poisoning of farmers and their families; improving and maintaining biodiversity.
- To achieve organic certification, only azo-free dyes, which do not contain toxic chemicals, are used in the dyeing process and all effluent is properly treated. In addition, the traceability of organic cotton down the supply chain means that it is the only cotton that you can be certain is GM-free.

Further Resources

- For more information about GreenKnickers, visit their website at www.greenknickers.org
- The Pesticide Action Network works to eliminate the dangers of toxic pesticides, our exposure to them, and their presence in the environment where we live and work. PAN-UK promotes safer alternatives, the production of healthy food, and sustainable farming. Find out more at www.pan-uk.org
- The Fairtrade Mark is an independent consumer label which appears on products as an independent guarantee that disadvantaged producers in the developing world are getting a better deal. Check out www.fairtrade.org.uk for more details.

Published January 2008