California-based outdoor apparel brand Patagonia has extended its environmental credibility further by introducing a new programme called Common Threads. Through this initiative, it hopes to bring to market an entire range of recycled clothing by autumn 2010.



Uncommon sense

Iconic outdoor brand Patagonia is so serious about the environment that it has a senior member of its executive team in the role of director of environmental analysis.

Her name is Jill Dumain and she knows the company inside out; she will celebrate 20 years at Patagonia in 2009. The main point she makes as she moves around the company and around the world talking about the role is that concern and care for the planet are not recent faddy add-ons at Patagonia, but part of the company's DNA. "The textile industry has a long history of working on performance and innovation," she says. "All we want to do is focus on innovation within an environmental framework."

This almost makes it sound easy, but she says it used to be easier when all Patagonia felt it had to do was give money to environmental organisations. The realisation that this could, quite easily, lead to a scenario in which you were helping make sure a river close to home (Ventura, California, in her company's case) while possibly polluting someone else's source of water on the other side of the world.

Now direct financial donations go to a not-for-profit organisation called 1% For The Planet, which the company's founder, Yvon Chouinard, helped set up in 2001. By the end of last year, more than 700 companies were members, including more than 100 European businesses, and their combined contributions came close to $30 million.

Money aside, Jill Dumain points to her company's pioneering work in using organic cotton for the first time in 1992 and recycled polyester in 1993. Now it's pushing through a programme called Common Threads.

Launched in 2005, this programme encourages consumers to return garments for recycling after they've stopped wearing them. At first, only Patagonia's Capilene performance baselayer garments were included, but now its fleece products, as well as fleece garments from other brands (as long as they were made with Polartec fabric), are part of the picture, as are organic T-shirts that bear the company's own label.

During this year, the programme will extend to the Ready Mix and Figure IV line of jackets, some products with synthetic insulation (such as the Puff vest), Patagonia boardshorts (including the Wavefarer II and Minimalist II Bordie models) and even a waterproof, breathable jacket made from recycled polyester, the Eco Rainshell.

Companies don't set out to harm the planet, but consumers now expect all businesses—not least those in the textile space—to do everything they can to protect the environment.

Patagonia



Patagonia's director of environmental analysis, Jill Dumain, says her company will continue its quest to produce "innovation within an environmental framework".

Volvo Sports Design Forum

Apparel afterlife

To drive the Common Threads programme forward, Patagonia poached a young executive, Todd Copeland, from the automotive industry. He was happy to move, attracted by the thought that his new company had been founded by someone who had written a management guide called 'Let my people go surfing' and invented 'clean climbing', even though that meant putting himself out of business—Mr Chouinard, you see, started out making metal pitons for climbers to hammer into cliff-faces.

He also liked the fact that Patagonia had been prepared to drop some of its styles and even lose money to make an internal change after reports in the early 1990s suggested cotton was compromising its environmental performance owing to the amount of pesticides involved in producing the fibre.

"Now we're working with organic cotton," Mr Copeland says, "but also with hemp, organic wool and chlorine-free wool. We want to keep using them all, and re-use the products to make new garments afterwards. We are talking about things that, otherwise, would probably be thrown out and go into landfill or into an incinerator."

At the end of a garment's useful life, consumers can take it to a Patagonia store or to the stores of some of its retail partners to hand it in for transportation to a special distribution centre in Reno, Nevada. If that's not convenient, the public can post old garments directly to the facility. The idea behind accepting material from other brands was that the system was already in place; Mr Copeland says his company might as well "collect as much of this useful material as possible".

From Reno, the different fabrics go to a partner organisation in Japan on container ships that would, otherwise (given the imbalance in trade-flows as the US continues to import more than it exports) return across the Pacific Ocean practically empty. They come back as new fabric with which Patagonia can make new garments.

Todd Copeland continues: "One of the benefits of this is energy-use. The recycled versions use 75% less energy and emit 45% less carbon dioxide. That's a good result; I was looking for levels that were no worse than we have when making new garments from scratch."

He says his immediate aim in his new role is to help Patagonia bring to market a whole range of recycled apparel for the autumn 2010 season. "It's a good goal to strive for," he says, "but we can't impose recycled products just for the sake of it. We don't want to compromise the quality of our products, of course, because people want and expect our garments to be of the highest quality."

Justice and peace

The company says its long-term goal in this arena is to "take environmental responsibility" for everything it makes.

For Jill Dumain, this question of responsibility goes very deep. She says: "It's about environmental justice. Consumers are asking questions at a much deeper level than ever before. They are more savvy, and they understand the global aspects of this. So we need to be responsible partners and operate correctly, applying the same criteria to the mills we work with in Taiwan and China as to mills in Europe."

She points out that brands now can take a real hammering for any slip, any chink in their environmental armour. After the product recall scandal involving toy manufacturer Mattel last year, she remembers that the Wall Street Journal published a long list of famous company names, taking them to task for their performance on waste management, and water treatment at factories, particularly in Asia. She says she has friends who work at some of those companies and knows well the lengths they go to to do this aspect of business as well as possible.

Companies don't set out to harm the planet, she points out; much of the damage we cause is unintentional—not that this is any excuse.

Through the green filter

Prevention being better than cure, Ms Dumain is part of a filtering process through which the ideas coming out of Patagonia's research and development team must pass, and she argues that this can save the company money in the long run. It gives a guarantee that a new product is in keeping with the corporate philosophy before it comes to market.

Even though it is a privately owned company, it is also extremely open about this aspect of what it does, making detailed information about the carbon footprint of a variety of products, including video clips, available to one and all on its corporate website in a new section called 'The Footprint Chronicles'.

With familiar Patagonia modesty, the environmental analysis director says part of the reason for carrying out this initiative was that the company wanted to examine for itself all the places and processes its products pass through on their way to retail shelves. So this information resource chronicles (hence the name) the full supply chain of five products. It will add more later.

"We're trying to be very transparent about this as part of taking full responsibility for what we do," Ms Dumain continues. "When we presented some of the information we gathered to our own employees they said, 'You can't say this'. But we have."



The Common Threads Programme has revealed that collecting old garments, including fleeces, and recycling the material into new products uses less energy and emits less carbon dioxide than manufacturing new ones from scratch.

Patagonia

Background information

The reason for her forthrightness is that consumers want end-to-end information these days. They want to know what's going on in the background.

"I do get sweaty palms sharing some of the information," she says. "I show a video in which our general manager for footwear, Craig Throne, talks about the need for us to use less packaging and fewer kinds of leather because the more types of leather you use, the more water you consume and it can be like putting one plate through your dishwasher. Craig also talks about using less glue and admits that the job he'd least like to do would be to glue shoe uppers to soles all day long."

It's interesting, in the role of devil's advocate, to wonder if Patagonia's status as a privately owned company—with no Wall Street and no shareholder groups to appease and impress—has less at stake in being so open about its environmental ambitions. Taking that thought one stage further, you may even wonder if the Ventura-based company aims to force its direct rivals, in following its example, to take risks and pledge resources against the wishes of investors.

"I'm sure there are people who think we're just being calculating," Jill Dumain acknowledges, "but I'm certain we're not. Our owners are determined to lead in this industry. And some of the things in which we've led in the past are really no longer radical. Take using recycled polyester. It was a really radical thing to do ten years ago, but it isn't now. That's what we want to achieve across the board, with our drive on organic cotton and other ideas. We want them to become part of the way everyone in the outdoor apparel space does business."