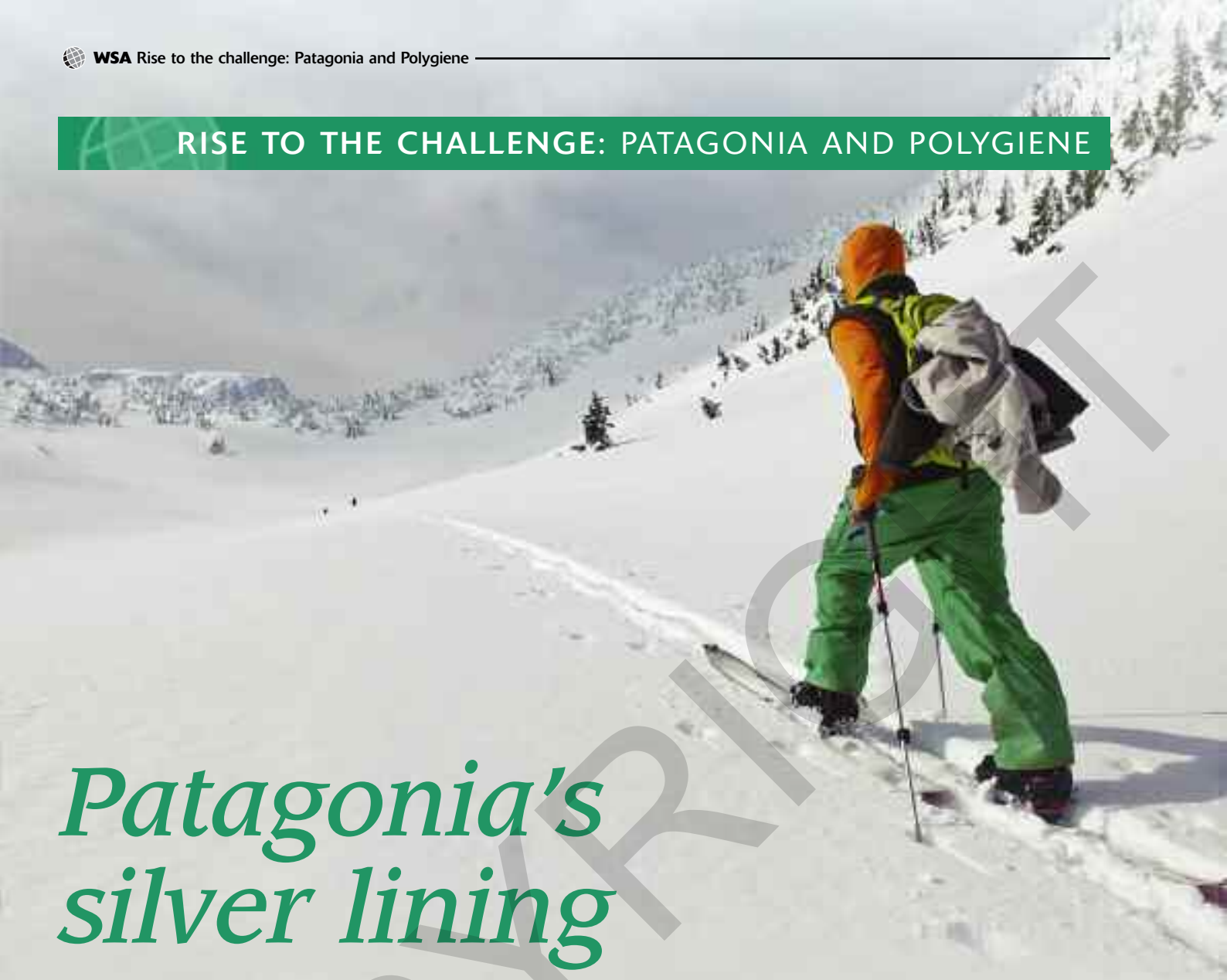
RISE TO THE CHALLENGE: PATAGONIA AND POLYGIENE



Patagonia's silver lining

The outdoor brand is notoriously thorough when it comes to choosing partners, so for Swedish antimicrobial expert Polygiene the tie-up is a welcome seal of approval.

"Patagonia is very tough. Sensibly, nicely, professionally tough – but it's very tough to get an approval on a product, because they're very thorough," says Concept III founder David Parkes of the outdoor company's policy on its collaborations. After more than two years of testing, both in the lab and extensively in the field, the US brand has chosen Sweden's Polygiene as its anti-odour and antimicrobial partner for its latest baselayer line, with Concept III acting as the agent. The Capilene collection will include the treatment in silkweight, lightweight, mid-weight and expedition weight styles, as well as in some trail running lines.

Patagonia has reason to be thorough – it is a leading company in the debate about sustainability in the outdoor industry and has contributed more than $49 million in cash and donations to environmental projects. Since 1996, it has used organic cotton and its entire product line is recyclable. The company advocates transparent supply chains through its website, which outlines the environmental and social footprint of individual products. As such, it had to be certain Polygiene would not only do the job but also fit with its eco stance and, above all, is safe – particularly in light of the questions that have been raised regarding silver technology over the last few years.

"We were looking for a new, more effective odour control technology that met our environmental standards," says Todd Copeland, environmental product specialist at Patagonia, on the initial thinking. "The environmental benefits of odour control technology on baselayer garments include extending the useful life of the garment and potentially reducing washings over that lifetime. But we had concerns about chemicals that kill or otherwise affect odour-causing microbes, how those chemicals are derived, what effects they may have on the environment and on the user of the garment."

Patagonia narrowed the search to a group of chemical companies that used small amounts of silver in the form of a salt and which achieved effective odour control results in field testing and

Patagonia snowboarding ambassador Josh Dirksen in Alaska. Cross-country skiing is one of many disciplines that could benefit from the antimicrobial baselayer.

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good supporting antimicrobial results in a bio lab test. "We wanted this effect to be durable after wearing and washing cycles. And we wanted it to be easy to apply consistently in different textile mills. We did research on our environmental concerns and asked the manufacturers to address each and every one."

Patagonia's partner mills around the world tested the rival silver-based antimicrobials, and the majority opted for Polygiene. "When we considered the value of marketing one branded technology versus our own explanation of a complex topic like odour control chemistry, we chose to partner with Polygiene," adds Mr Copeland.

Next generation

Polygiene is made using recycled silver, derived mainly from the UK electronics industry and added to textiles at the finishing stage. Silver, long used as an antimicrobial for its bacteria-inhibiting properties, is used in the chloride form, rather than the nanosilvers used by some companies which have been linked to adversely affecting health.

"Patagonia had historically looked at antimicrobials that were silver, so we showed them we had the next generation," says Polygiene's CEO, Christian von Uthmann. "We demonstrated that we only needed a small amount to get the functionality out of the garment, and you can apply it with existing finishing processes, so you get a very environmentally friendly and flexible value chain."

The technology was borne out of Polygiene's work in the healthcare sector, where it began by applying the finish to hospital furniture and surfaces. "What we learnt from the healthcare sector is that, firstly, you have to deliver the functionality – it has to inhibit the bacteria. Secondly, you have to be very skin safe. And thirdly, being based in Sweden, you have to have your environmental story in place. So both Oeko-Tex and bluesign [environmental certifications] came on very early in the process."

Patagonia says that having bluesign approval and being made from recycled silver were key attributes that led it to select Polygiene. The concentrated additive has been classified for direct skin contact according to the Kawai method [test for skin safety], which means it can be applied to bandages and dressings for wounds. "This classification is important because, in the States in particular and in Europe, for a couple of years a few of the leading brands were concerned that silver salt might be ingested into the bloodflow, and now we've confirmed it is not, brands have abandoned this issue," explains Mr Parkes.

The company still works in the healthcare sector, a factor Mr Von Uthmann believes offers reassurance. "We're selling comfort to the brands





The new Polygiene-treated Capeline baselayer.

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Patagonia has partnered Argentinean sheep-farmer network Ovis XXI for the merino wool for its baselayers, and will donate money from sales to a project to restore over-grazed grasslands.

Patagonia

that they're not going to have customers calling them saying their children have developed a skin rash, and there is also comfort in that for the retailer," he says. "Seeing is believing but testing is even better. It's comforting for the consumer to know it's absolutely skin safe."

"We think this is at the highest-level performance of odour control technology available today, and meets strict environmental criteria and addresses all known concerns with antimicrobial and silver chemistry," adds Mr Copeland.

Cradle to grave

Another important focus is the "cradle to grave" aspect. The treatment stays on the garment for its lifetime (100 washes) and so can, in effect, be washed less. "Design and production make up one third of the environmental effect, while the consumer makes two thirds, through the washing, discharge, etc," explains Mr Von Uthmann. "If you have the quality and function you wash less - you can use less water and energy, and garments are going to last longer."

This will also be beneficial to Patagonia customers who are serious trekkers, mountaineers or cross-country skiers, for instance. On long expeditions they will be able to take fewer baselayers without fear of odour, meaning they can travel lightly. "It's important to remember it's not only the production that needs to be environmental, it's also how the consumer is able to work with the product," adds Mr Von Uthmann.

Education is part of this story. The companies have agreed to work together on the "message", with Polygiene embarking on its own marketing strategy. Mr Parkes explains, "To convince the trade is relatively straightforward but to convince the retailer takes longer and to convince the consumer takes longer still – but we plan on doing that." Patagonia also insisted its sales force is well-versed on the benefits, stipulating that Mr Von Uthmann fly to the US to present the technology to staff.

A marriage of equals?

One of the pleasing things for Polygiene is that Patagonia is promoting the technology by name, rather than swallowing it up into its own brand. Big companies haven't often advertised partners in the supply chain, but industry observers suggest this will become more prevalent as consumers begin to expect added technology and become aware of some of the players.

The Capeline line – which is made either of polyester or merino wool sourced from the Patagonia region in Argentina under a scheme that promotes sustainable grazing practices – will be available from this autumn.

"Getting some brands to seriously address technical features is sometimes difficult because it's one of their lower priorities when it comes to that final decision-making," concludes Mr Parkes. "This industry recognises technology, and as time goes on technologies are becoming more and more important as differentiators. Now Patagonia has endorsed this technology and are promoting it as their anti-odour added-value product, the market will move into this."

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