Sustainability has been a buzzword in the sport and outdoor industry for many years now. Companies are continually looking for new ways to reduce the impact they have on the environment and thinking up ways to "outgreen" each other. This covers a whole range of practices, such as changing the materials they use in their collections, and reducing energy and water consumption.

Making products last longer

One of the simplest ways companies can help prevent damage to the environment is to reverse the "fast fashion" trend which treats clothing as if it is almost disposable. For many, low prices are far more important than quality as today's t-shirt will be no good next week. However, by making products that last longer without looking dated or losing their performance benefits, textile and sporting goods firms can do their bit in helping to reduce the industry's global carbon footprint.

Refusing to throw it away

Germany-based mountain sports specialist Vaude, for example, has committed itself to producing products that are built to last. This is partly because its outdoor clothing and equipment must be able to stand up to challenging conditions. However, it has also made it clear that its aim in doing this is to make as little impact as possible on the environment in which its products are used. "Well-crafted goods don't end up in the rubbish bin," says company spokesperson Johanna Weishaupt. "Vaude uses materials that offer great durability and a long lifespan, taking the environment into consideration."

Questions about the commercial viability of making long-lasting products have been asked. If an item lasts 10 years, how does the company make its money? In response, Vaude claims making quality goods has always been profitable; because by doing so customers trust the brand and word spreads. Someone who buys a backpack that lasts for 15 years is more likely to go back for a sleeping bag, a pair of shoes or an item of clothing, for example. "I think customers recognise good quality and so are ok with paying for good products," Ms Weishaupt says. "If the quality is ok, customers honour it and next time might also choose Vaude as a favourite brand."

Furthermore, the mountain sports firm has come up with a way of making its products last even longer through its special repair service.



Vaude is doing all it can to prevent products being thrown away. Its repair service can get items back into shape even after 10 or 20 years of use.

Vaude

According to Ms Weishaupt, it repairs products even after 10 or 20 years and gets them back into shape. "Vaude distances itself from the throw-away mentality," she says. "Many customers have fallen so in love with their gear, they just won't give it up. Even when colours and designs are no longer in style, the gear does its job. So it shouldn't end up at the dump." She adds that the repair service has become so popular that even some of its competitors' products end up there.

Socks with a difference

Similarly, specialist outdoor sock brand, Teko, makes its products to last as part of its company-wide commitment to the sustainability issue. A well made sock that uses high-quality material will not need replacing as often. Teko says this saves material resources, energy, and money, so it reinforces all of its socks with high-durability

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The Icebreaker Rapid Zip-Thru top. The company says its sustainability credentials are helping it make a big impact in the sport of trail-running.

Icebreaker

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fibres such as recycled polyester and nylon, especially at the heel and toe.

The Summit mid-weight hiking sock, for example, is made from 74% organic wool, reinforced with 23% nylon, with 3% Lycra added for stretch. There are specific products for a huge range of outdoor and sports activity—back-country skiing, cycling, gym sports, ice climbing, mountaineering and trail-running to name just a few—each with specific features to offer a high level of performance, and each constructed from fibres that make the lowest possible impact on the earth.

The wool in the Summit sock goes, according to Teko, "beyond organic". It comes from a group of 20-plus organic farms in Argentina, all of which have been farming wool organically for years in accordance with international guidelines. One aspect of this is that the wool farmers use no motorised vehicles in herding and caring for their sheep. Teko takes its supply from a combing company that is also certified and accredited under the Global Organic Textile Standard. The material makes its way to the US, to manufacturing partners in North Carolina where all the socks are knitted. And back at Teko headquarters in Denver, everything runs on wind power.

All of this, according to marketing manager, Heather McGarry, combines to make Teko "a little bit different". She explains: "It's not difficult to be wind-powered; it just costs more. And it's the same with manufacturing the socks in the US. It gives us a shorter distance to transport the socks, but it also makes it easier for us to be sure about what is happening in our supply chain. There's really no point in going to all this trouble if, at the end of the production process, your partners are letting dye contaminate a stream."

Returning to the question of durability, she says adding a proportion of polyester can make a sock last twice as long. Some customers have had pairs last as long as four years without wearing out, which, bearing in mind the conditions and activity the socks have to endure, is a remarkable achievement. There are several non-standard features in the construction of the products. The toe is seamless: no edge against the toes makes them more comfortable. All models have an arch brace to provide support and better fit. They also have an articulated Y-heel, which creates a round shape, a kind of pocket for the heel of the foot. This increases durability because the heel of the sock and the heel of the foot are the same shape.

A sock without a round heel, Ms McGarry continues, will constantly find itself forced to take a shape it has not been engineered to take, which is why heels are, typically, a wear-point.

In some models, there are flexibility zones, at the instep and along the length of the sock. The effect of this is to give almost a custom-fit to everyone, no matter the shape of the wearer's feet. Eliminating bagginess reduces wrinkles, which helps an outdoor enthusiast avoid blisters and discomfort.

Ms McGarry says many companies are cropping up with an offering of outdoor socks because the margin in socks can be high. In one sense, then, Teko takes a hit by making a product that lasts for years, but she says she and her colleagues have the benefit of being able to sleep easily at night time.

The clue is in the name

As the name suggests, durability has been a core part of the Cordura brand since its inception. This is why, according to global brand manager, Cindy McNaull, the brand has decided to go back to its roots with a new sustainability platform called Cordura Cares, with a tag line that says, 'Sustainability begins with products that last'.

"Since we launched our Cordura Cares platform, we have had tremendous response from our customers," Ms McNaull explains. "JanSport, Osprey and Briggs and Riley are just a few of the names that have come out in support of our sustainability positioning. Our customers rely on our fabrics when durability counts. Many offer a lifetime guarantee and using Cordura fabrics helps give them confidence to stand behind their products. And, in today's retail climate, products that last longer not only make sense from a sustainability perspective, but also economically."

Deb Boswell, director of marketing in the US for New Zealand outdoor brand Icebreaker, believes that brands like hers, which focus firmly on natural fibres (merino in the case of Icebreaker), have a distinct advantage in the market because synthetics cannot offer the same sustainability story. "Yes, there's the whole recyclable programme now, but that's more than matched by something like merino that's sustainable in the first place, she comments.

For her, this ability to offer something natural and renewable, and something that controls odour naturally, has helped Icebreaker break into the trail-running market with new products such as the Rapid mid-weight leggings or the Slalom zip action top. "Trail-running is one of the few sports that's really growing at the moment," she continues, "so for us to have been able to come



The Summit sock uses recycled nylon at the heel and toe to make it last longer.

Teko

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into it with a new story has been great. We're really seeing the run channel open up and we're outselling Nike and adidas."

Part of that story is that Icebreaker, which is the biggest buyer of merino wool in the world, is able to offer full traceability of the fibre, including the farmer's name and the living conditions of the sheep. It's a long-term commitment. The company has contracts going out seven years and is taking all the wool those farmers can produce.

Slow process

Similarly, New Zealand-based knitted fabrics and garments manufacturer Designer Textiles has a strong environmental focus. It also uses merino wool and has made a sustained effort to ensure the farms it works with are committed to environmental responsibility and sustainability in their farm management practices.

Furthermore, it has looked at each stage of its manufacturing process, from knitting and dyeing to finishing in order to ensure it is producing high-quality goods and that it is doing as much as possible to protect the environment. "Our philosophy reflects our dedication to environmentally friendly fabric manufacturing and finishing processes, to ensure our fabrics remain a sustainable and biodegradable resource," says the company. The company is also working hard to make products that will resist wear-and-tear, helping them to last longer.

Its MAPP Tech fabrics have a 100% merino core for next-to-skin softness and comfort. The baselayer is linked to a protective outerlayer made from various technical fabrics. The result is a lightweight, robust and comfortable fabric which helps to regulate core body temperature and provides protection in extreme conditions.

However, company spokesperson Shelley Parker explains that consumers are not always aware of the properties offered by merino wool and often assume it will look plain and unappealing. She explains that this is simply not the case; the company is constantly updating the colours and, more recently, the prints it uses to offer eye-catching, modern-looking garments.

The other preconception it has to deal with is that merino is too heavy and too warm to use in sport. However, the firm's fabrics are extremely lightweight and help keep the body cool during exercise. "It's the world's most natural technical fibre," says Ms Parker. But convincing buyers can take some doing. "It takes a while to filter through. It can be a slow education process," she says.

In addition to using this high-quality, renewable fibre, Designer Textiles has come up with various ways of combating the "fast fashion" approach. One is that it provides lifestyle clothing that can be worn for a range of activities, which means that consumers need only buy one item of clothing where they might otherwise have bought two or three. Furthermore, its garments are designed to go the distance. "Wool lasts almost forever," says Ms Parker, who claims the economic downturn has prompted demand for premium products that offer better quality and will last longer.



By producing quality goods, Vaude says it is attracting repeat business prompting word-of-mouth advertising of the brand.

Vaude

She adds that merino comes with a premium price tag but offers incredible benefits compared with other technical fibres. She explains that the education process begins at grass level and that awareness is certainly starting to improve. Rather than buying a product simply because it looks nice and is reasonably priced, consumers seem to be more discerning – and more interested in where the product came from, how it was made and how long it will last them.

It is important that each of these companies engages with the customer about the benefits of buying products that will last and persuades them that a little extra investment could actually make a big difference, both for them and for the world in which they live. Rather than buying cheap products that will either be out of fashion, or will not offer the quality level needed, consumers can change the current trend simply by buying less and keeping hold of the goods that have performed well over time. There is no reason why sports and outdoor apparel and accessories should not last many years and, even if they start to deteriorate at this point, the options to repair or recycle the items are already in place.

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