## GAME CHANGERS: PROFESSOR GAIL WHITEMAN

In this new section of the magazine, we hold a series of detailed conversations with industry figures who are involved first hand in technical innovation, new design ideas, environmental projects and other initiatives that are certain to make an impact on the wider outdoor and sports sectors. The series continues here with a conversation with Professor Gail Whiteman, who took up a new position last year as the head of Lancaster University's Pentland Centre for research into the sustainability challenges faced by businesses today.

# Meeting of minds

**Where are you from and what is the path that led you to the job you do now?**

I was born in Toronto and that's where I started work after college in the late 1980s, in marketing, communications and advertising, mostly focusing on fast moving consumer goods. It was an exciting and demanding career for an ambitious young manager, but I found myself becoming increasingly worried about some of the unintended consequences of the consumer goods industry. I went to Central America to become involved in international development work because I wanted to use my business skills to be a force for good. In the mid-90s, I did a PhD that took me on research trips to James Bay in the north of Canada to look at the impact of business on communities there. There was this pristine environment and local people who felt they had been taking a sustainable approach for millennia. It gave me a really important set of insights that a number of big companies gained from. A think-tank approached me and I worked there for a while until I went to the Rotterdam School of Management to work on corporate social responsibility and sustainability, staying for more than a decade. My husband is Dutch and my children were born in the Netherlands too. It's a small country but it has a number of leading chief executives and it was great to have the chance to work with them, people such as Paul Polman of Unilever, Feike Sijbesma of DSM and Peter Bakker, formerly of TNT and now the president of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. When I was approached by the University of Lancaster in 2015 to head up its new Pentland Centre for research into solutions for the sustainability challenges faced by businesses today, it seemed to bring all my worlds together. Impressed as I was with Lancaster's vision, I wouldn't have come if this had only been about an ivory tower. Corporate sponsor, the Pentland Group, has been at the vanguard of ethical supply chains since the 1980s and is in the great position of being a family-run company, so it's not as exposed to short-term stock-market pressures.

**What does your job involve?**

Because we started from scratch, it's involved building up research and outreach activities with companies and other key stakeholders, hiring faculty and co-ordinating research bids. The mission is to connect the best minds in science with the best minds in business.

**What are the principal factors that make it difficult for businesses in general and in the outdoor industry in particular to embrace sustainability completely?**

Two general things. We have to show businesses that, from a scientific perspective, it's no longer an option not to address sustainability, because we are driving off a cliff. We have to look after our own future, and that future is already here as many communities, not least in the Lake District, so close to Lancaster, found when serious flooding hit them this winter. Extreme weather events are going to continue to occur and there will be social consequences, too, for example unemployment. The system as we know it cannot continue and economies have to shift. There are some front-runners, but some form of carbon pricing is going to be imposed and it will no longer be voluntary to build in the cost of the environmental impact of our products. It's a real cost and companies are going to have to price their goods and services appropriately. This will give us a more level playing field. Consumers don't need to buy so much.

*Professor Gail Whiteman at the start of her role heading up the new Pentland Centre for research into solutions for sustainability challenges at the University of Lancaster.*

*University of Lancaster*

**How do you counter complaints from companies that end consumers often only pay lip-service when they say they support sustainable business but balk at any increase in price?**

Most consumers don't want to wear clothes that will ruin the planet or that involve child labour. But do we know where all our clothes come from? Consumers do balk at price increases but part of the difficulty is that there are way too many things to figure out in the global supply chain. We need to figure out a better framework for production and for consumption, including end-of-life. This will take us towards a circular economy. Things are changing. When I first went to business school nobody talked about changing the system; now we are talking about it.

**If you could show our readers one place in the world, where would you take us ? How would we get there? What would we see? What would we need to wear?**

We'd go to the far north of Canada to see the pristine wilderness I was talking about, but we'd need to hurry because it's melting. At the end of December 2015 temperatures were far above zero degrees Celsius, which means they were about 20 degrees warmer than they should have been. Climate change is happening and it affects the people who live there. The whole world is becoming more dangerous as a result because what happens in the Arctic changes the global system of snow and rain, which changes agriculture and triggers extreme weather events such as flood and drought. We take beautiful places like northern Canada for granted, but we shouldn't. Ten years ago, to go up there, we'd have needed big boots and a parka suitable for wearing when it's minus 40°C. This year, a down jacket would do.

**And if you could take us from there to one bar or restaurant (anywhere in the world) to unwind, which one would you choose?**

Much better than a bar or restaurant, I'd choose to go by canoe to camp in an old-growth forest. It's good just to experience something that's bigger than ourselves.

