

The insulation in United By Blue's Bison Puffer Jacket is a blend of bison fibre and recycled polyester.

United By Blue

SUSTAINABILITY: UNITED BY BLUE

Outdoor brand United By Blue is opposed to any kind of wasteful behaviour. As well as fighting back against waste through company-organised clean-up activities, it has also found a use for an often overlooked by-product of the bison meat industry.

Waste is a terrible thing

Brian Linton, founder of outdoor brand United By Blue, believes a commitment to protecting the environment should go beyond simply writing a cheque. Real action is needed. When he launched the company in 2010 his vision was for it to contribute to environmental conservation not by flexing its financial muscle but by making use of the manpower at its disposal. It is for this reason that his team organises and takes part in clean-up activities. Mr Linton is more than happy to pitch in himself.

From the very start, his target was to collect one pound (just under half a kilogramme) of trash from coastlines and waterway for every item the brand sold. It initially sold graphic T-shirts but its offering has since been expanded to a full line of outdoor apparel and accessories for men and women. It sells its products online, through REI retailers and at its own retail location in Philadelphia.

In line with its commitment to more sustainable production, the materials it uses include recycled polyester, organic cotton and wool. A number of its products also feature a slightly more unusual material, insulation made from the fibres of the coat of the American bison (sometimes referred to as the American buffalo).

From waste to warmth

The brand's proprietary insulation, which it refers to as BisonShield, is a mix of recycled polyester fibres and fibres taken from the bison coat. Its Bison Puffer Jacket is the latest garment to feature BisonShield. It was among the products recognised at the inaugural Outdoor Retailer Innovation Awards, handed out at November's Winter Market in Denver.

"We ventured into the world of synthetic insulation, but were never able to find something we could truly stand behind both technically and environmentally," Mr Linton explains. "Our only solution was to create something entirely new."

United By Blue has worked for five years to build a supply chain that allows it to collect the hollow hairs that make up the shaggy coat of the American bison. It intercepts this material from the Canadian ranching industry, working with ranchers in Alberta to shear the hides they process. Shearing takes place before the hides are sent to a tannery to be turned into leather. The coat, a by-product of the bison meat industry, could have otherwise been wasted. As the company puts it: "One man's trash is another's high-performance insulation".



Founder Brian Linton has played an active role in several of the clean-ups organised by the company.

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It hit upon the idea of using bison fibres in insulation while employing the downy part of the animal's coat in a range of socks. Realising the untapped potential of this material, and with the contacts to source it already in place, the company began exploring how the coarser fibres could be used. Its research found they offered many of the qualities required for an insulation product. "The most important part of a jacket is what you can't see: the insulation inside," Mr Linton says.

The coarse fibres are separated from the soft down at a facility in Maine, with a number of sorting stages taking place. United By Blue's insulation is mostly made up of the coarse fibres, with just a small proportion of the softer down

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retained. Once the material has been collected and treated it is sent to a facility in Texas where it is mixed with recycled polyester. The company says BisonShield is a blend of 50% bison fibre, 30% recycled polyester and 20% low-melt polyester, which acts as the bonding agent that gives the insulation the structure it needs to withstand everyday wear and tear. The weight it uses is 190gsm.

Besides its capacity for retaining heat, BisonShield is said to be naturally temperature regulating, hypoallergenic and lightweight. It is quilted into baffles so that it keeps its shape and doesn't settle over time. It is flexible enough for use in a variety of activities.

The Bison Puffer Jacket was released at the end of October. Available in sizes for men and women, it also incorporates a waterproof two-layer shell fabric and a range of features designed to optimise it for use in outdoor activities including a reverse coil zipper, an anchored drawcord and ample pocket space. The brand has also created a sleeveless version, the Bison Puffer Vest.

Community clean-up

United By Blue announced at the start of November that it had completed a Series A financing round, which was led by venture capital group Emil Capital Partners. It intends to use the capital raised to support ongoing innovation in its supply chain and new product development. It will also allow it to boost its clean-up efforts.

Its ocean and waterway conservation activities have so far helped to remove nearly 1.5 million pounds (nearly 700,000 kilogrammes) of trash. It has organised more than 250 clean-ups since 2010, which have taken place across all mainland US states, Canada and countries in Europe. In 2018, it launched a nationwide tour, hosting clean-ups across the US. It refers to these activities as 'the Bluemovement'.

"Ocean plastic pollution is one of the most serious threats to our planet, and it's an issue we've been addressing via our business model for nearly nine years," Mr Linton said when discussing the new investment in November. "With this funding, we are able to bring our products to more people around the world, and as a result, increase both the awareness towards this issue and scale our clean-up efforts as well."

For the past three years United By Blue has used the publicity around Black Friday, the day after the US Thanksgiving holiday that has become a major shopping event, to encourage its customers to help with clean-up efforts. Rebranding it as 'Blue Friday', it asks friends, family and community members to spend an hour of their time outside picking up trash. This is not purely restricted to those living near waterways, where the brand says most trash ends up eventually. It even gives out a prize for the most interesting piece of trash collected.

For the first time in 2018 it began collecting and sharing data from the Blue Friday initiative with the scientific community. The data collected included clean-up locations, the quantities of various items collected (e.g. plastic straws, bag, bottles and cutlery) and the most unusual items found. It will continue to do this in the years to come.

"Although the amount of trash we remove is important, the bigger thing is to use United By Blue's platform to stop the trash from getting there in the first place," Mr Linton says. He concedes that the time when there is no trash to pick up is not on the horizon, so raising awareness is more important than ever. "In reality, the biggest impact we can have as an organisation is to help bring awareness and change people's behaviour in relation to single use plastics, to things that are wasteful and to behaviour that is disrespectful to the environment," he adds.



A step into shoes

Not content with finding a use for one by-product of the bison meat industry, United By Blue partnered with US footwear brand Danner last September to launch a capsule collection of products, the centrepiece of which was a boot made from full-grain bison leather. The leather was tanned at Horween Leather, a family-run business that has been making leather for over 100 years, and the boot was manufactured at Danner's factory in Portland.

The partners highlighted durability and waterproofness as two of the qualities of bison leather that make it suitable for use in shoes. They also said it is easy to break in, especially beneficial for footwear. The UBB x Danner Light Bison boot, available in sizes for men and women, also has a Gore-Tex liner and a Vibram outsole. The tongue of the product is embossed with the logos of both brands.

"When we started using bison fibre by making socks five years ago, we knew that there would be opportunity to expand our offerings – but making a boot from bison leather was nowhere on our radar," Mr Linton has said. "For this reason and many more, this collaboration is an exciting addition to our bison collection and further illustrates how this animal provides us with the opportunity to make high quality products from the most sustainable materials possible."

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