



The difference between greenwashing and not greenwashing is action, says Patagonia. Its latest product that will be offered to its competitors – the Personal Surf Inflation vest – will indirectly protect an endangered surf point in Peru.

Making waves

Sports and outdoorwear companies that report to shareholders lose the ability to be truly green as profit will always be the overriding goal, said Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard in a recent interview with German publication *Der Spiegel*. It echoes the sentiment in his book, *Let My People Go Surfing*, in which he says that when a company “becomes the fatted calf, it’s sold for a profit, and its resources and holdings are often ravaged and broken apart”.

“There is a lot of greenwashing in our industry,” he explained, pointing out that bamboo fibres might sound environmentally friendly but strong chemicals are used in the manufacturing process, and that some of the cotton initiatives are not as sound as they first appear (although this was described in more colourful language!).

While the publication challenged him on the

environmental credentials of a multi-million-dollar clothing company, nobody could accuse Patagonia of greenwashing. It has given 1% of sales to grassroots environmental organisations for more than 30 years, totalling more than \$84 million. It gave the profits from its ‘Do Not Buy This Jacket’ Black Friday 2016 campaign away – all \$10 million. The income had risen fivefold from the previous year, despite encouraging customers to repair, reuse or recycle old clothing rather than buying new. “It is a kind of karma: every time we do the right thing, we end up doing a good deal ourselves.”

Saving lives

Patagonia’s latest product to help the environment, albeit indirectly, is its Personal Surf Inflation (PSI) vest, which has been five years in development. It is not designed as a life vest and comes with multiple disclaimers

Big wave surfing is a risky sport: a wave can push surfers down 6m to 15.5m below the surface and they typically have less than 20 seconds before the next wave hits.

 Patagonia

about safety - but is designed as a tool to reduce risk. All proceeds from the sales will go towards protecting surfing destination Punto de Lobos in Peru, which is being threatened by increasing tourist activity and unfettered commercial development.

In 2011, with a few "near misses" involving Patagonia ambassadors and friends, the R&D team began to develop the PSI Vest as a tool to help keep surfers safer in big waves. "The idea came about as a request from our ambassadors after they lost a close friend, Sion Milosky, at Mavericks in 2011," Patagonia's surf director, Jason McCaffrey, tells WSA. "There was a gap in the market but only because advancements in being able to catch big waves using your own two arms were happening faster than anything on the safety side. Since then it's not uncommon for guys to have support teams with spotters and swimmers to even further reduce risk."

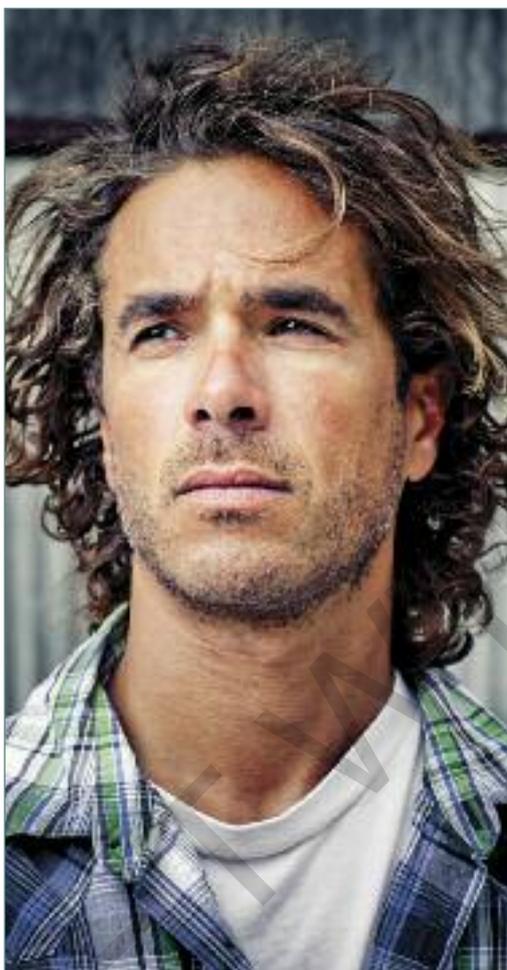
The vest features four CO₂ canisters, which can be inflated in different sequences, or all four can be inflated if the wearer feels they are not ascending fast enough. Five hundred surfers tested the design, offering feedback, before it was finalised and launched in July.

"Without their participation, I'm not sure we would have as good a vest as we do, and I think the fact that we were granted a patent on the design further proves it is a unique device. That said, during the process of testing a few very experienced and highly skilled professional watermen had close calls. These were the guys that were so well trained, comfortable and confident in big water situations that when they actually pulled the vest it was because they were in a situation where it was their last resort. That's when we knew that tools like the vest were an inevitable necessity for where self-powered big wave surfing was going."

Sharing the wealth

One of Patagonia's defining differences is that it offers some of its research to other companies in a bid to better the industry. It was the first to look into responsible down (sourced from ducks and geese that are not force-fed or live-plucked), which has since become an industry-wide standard; its surf department is particularly active in the field. Four years ago, after it funded research into suits made from the guayule plant, it said competitors were welcome to use its findings, and encouraged them to approach them and even use their Taiwanese manufacturer to reduce dependence on 'nasty' neoprene.

It is now offering the PSI design to other surf companies in return for a licensing fee. It is also available to the public through two of its stores, in Ventura, CA and Hale'iwa, in Hawaii –



Patagonia's surf director, Jason McCaffrey.

 *Tim Davis/Patagonia*

although the purchaser must have been certified by the Big Wave Risk Assessment Group.

All licensing proceeds will be donated to Punta de Lobos Por Siempre, an organisation led by Chilean surfer and Patagonia ambassador Ramón Navarro to protect Punta de Lobos. Patagonia has supported the campaign since 2014, when it released *The Fisherman's Son*, a film about Navarro and his environmental work. The initiative helped raise more than \$362,000, and Patagonia hopes that licensing the PSI Vest patent to others in the industry will help close the remaining \$350,000 gap needed to fully protect the point.

"Turning five years of research and development into a programme where we use our intellectual property to get industry members to help protect an iconic surf break is another point of difference for Patagonia's surf business," adds Mr McCaffrey.

Earlier this year, the company made its full line of board shorts and bikinis Fair Trade certified, paying a premium so workers can elevate their living standards. The extra money has been used to fund childcare programmes and vouchers for medicine and household goods and, at a factory in Los Angeles, workers voted for a dividend that equalled up to a week's pay.

When questioned on Yvon Chouinard's comments, Mr McCaffrey says the difference between greenwashing and not greenwashing is action. "Marketing departments and agencies can have a field day with the latest green buzzwords that focus groups composed of the target demographic may find appealing but if you are serious about protecting and preserving the environment, your actions speak for themselves," he tells us. "In my opinion, those who take no action and only use the words to make people think they take action are guilty as charged."

Using its voice

His boss, CEO Rose Marcario, agrees and the company has been using its influence this year to speak out against policies it sees as damaging to the environment, at a national and international level.

"Over the past few months, the business environment has changed dramatically," she said in April. "I'm not talking about trade policy or tax reform, but rather the heightened moral and ethical uncertainty many business leaders now feel at a time when the foundations of our democracy are challenged. New injustices seem to arise almost every day, demanding we speak up and act. It's often not a business choice, but a human imperative, sometimes it's both."

She was vocal about condemning President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate accord and said the company remains "actively engaged" with the international community to hold global warming to well below 2°C and to accelerate the transition to a clean energy economy.

The US department of the Interior is reviewing the status of 27 US national monuments, including Bears Ears in Utah. Patagonia was quick to join peers including Columbia and Keen in a campaign organised by the Outdoor Industry Association to lobby against the changes in Washington, and was the first to declare it would not return to Outdoor Retailer if it continued to be held in Utah, in protest at state governor Gary Herbert's involvement in the proposed changes. Show organisers in July announced they had found a new home for the show in Denver, Colorado, where it will be located from January 2018 (see Emerald Exhibitions feature, WSA July/August).

Benefit corporation

Next on the horizon is a plan to extend Patagonia's Worn Wear programme to an online platform, which will enable customers to bring used items to their local store in exchange for merchandise credits. Patagonia will then organise their resale online. "We want our friends and customers to learn that the single

best thing you can do for the planet is to use stuff longer," explains Ms Marcario.

All of which echoes Mr Chouinard's sentiments; after all, the 79-year-old founder still plays an active role in the company, even if he spends a few of the summer months fishing. He used to receive regular approaches from potential buyers, but in 2012 registered Patagonia as a Benefit Corporation – the first business in California to do so – so profit cannot be valued above all else.

"Our intent is to remain a private company," he says, "so we can continue to focus on our bottom line: doing good." 



The PSI vest has been tested by hundreds of professional surfers.

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