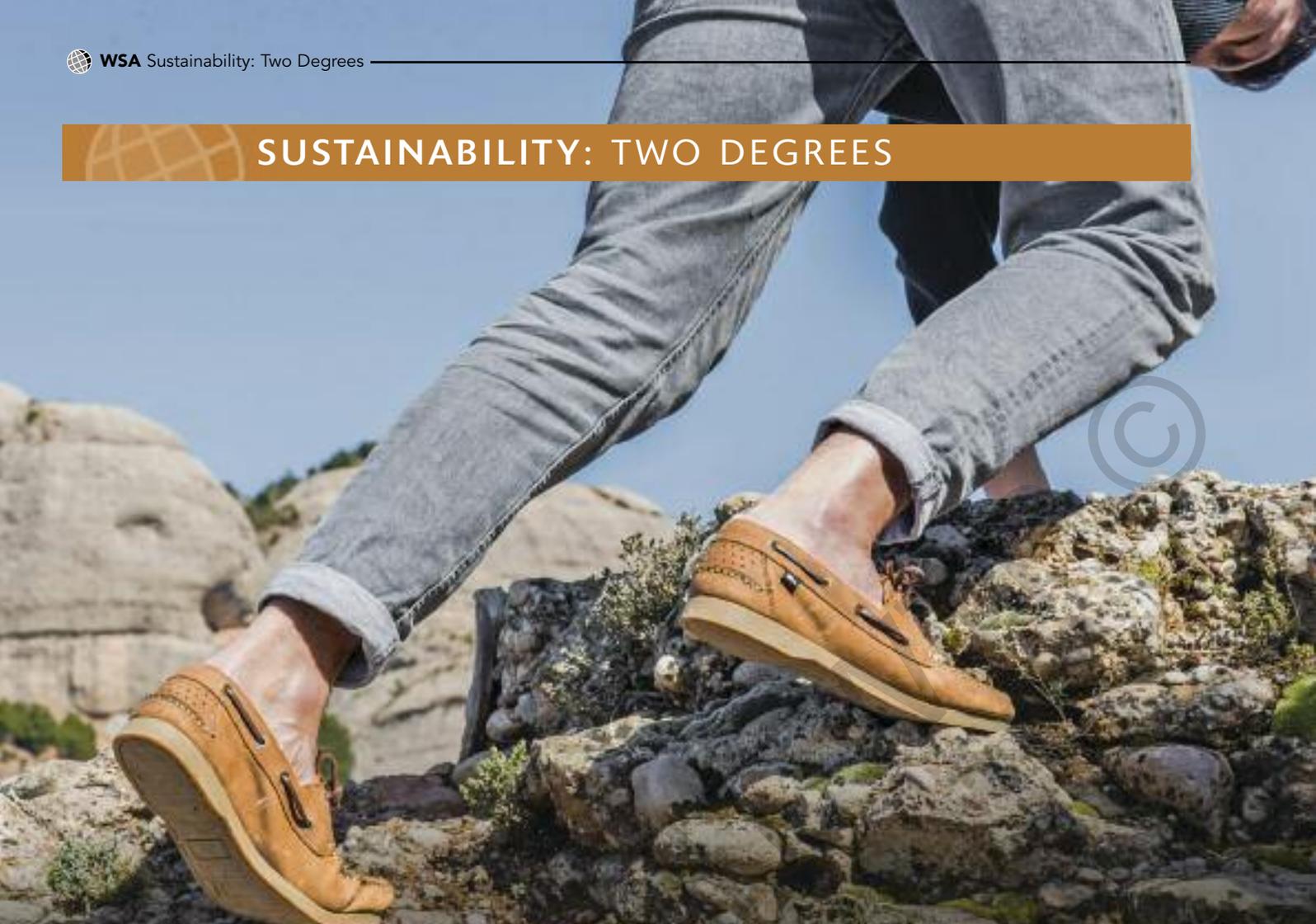


SUSTAINABILITY: TWO DEGREES



Confusion in the marketplace over the sustainability credentials of leather and its competitor materials is rife. When boating shoe brand Two Degrees launched in June this year following a successful crowdfunding campaign, its founders put special emphasis on the footwear's environmental credentials. But finding a way to describe the materials they had chosen to use proved to be "a minefield".

An environmentally progressive shoe brand

Boat shoe start-up Two Degrees launched a crowd-funding campaign at the end of May 2018 to help it produce its inaugural collection this autumn and passed its target, £20,000, within a couple of hours.

It will now go ahead and make the shoes, which use recycled rubber in the sole and high-quality metal-free leather in uppers that offer the added benefit of biodegrading quickly in landfill. Although based in the UK, it is sourcing the

leather, all of the other materials and components and the finished shoes themselves from a variety of partners in Portugal.

Two Degrees has set itself up to be an "environmentally progressive" company and took its name from the 2015 Paris Agreement (to hold the increase in the global average temperature to less than two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels). It has pledged to work with conservation group World Land Trust to help protect endangered habitats around the

Two Degrees' supplier of soling materials tried 13 or 14 combinations of materials before finding one that was just right for the "environmentally progressive" start-up.

 Two Degrees

globe, promising to protect 1,000 square-feet of land for every pair of boat shoes that customers pre-order as part of a programme called Feet For Feet. The brand has said its aim is to protect 25 million square-feet of vulnerable land, in places such as Mexico, Ecuador and Argentina, by 2020. This means founders, Luke Gibson and Plum Turner, are confident of selling 25,000 pairs by then. Even the box that Two Degrees shoes come in is “environmentally progressive”; the brand has called it “the world’s first plantable shoe-box”.

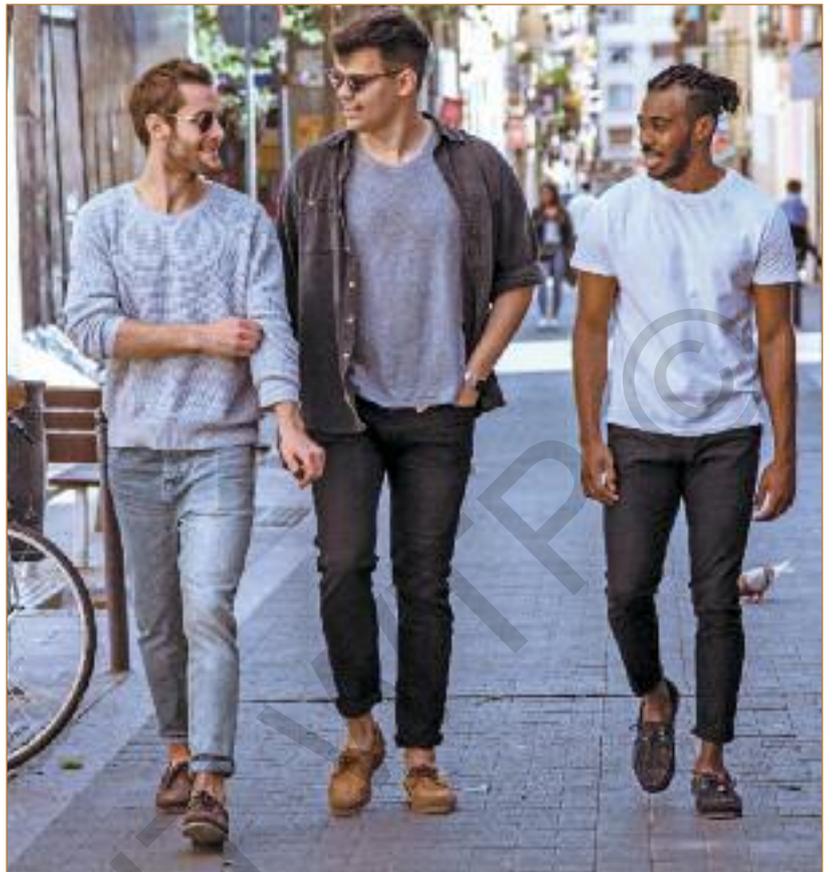
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In spite of all this, Two Degrees has said it would like to ban the word ‘sustainability’ because it fears the term is now so over-used it means very little. “Transparency is the key to this,” Mr Gibson says. “Fashion companies often say they are sustainable, but they don’t explain how they are sustainable. Sometimes they just use the term to make the consumer feel good. But it’s the same for everyone: the more you sell, the more you will deplete resources. We know that we will consume more resources as we make more shoes, but we have analysed our product lifecycle from start to finish and we will work to be as low-waste as possible and to get better at what we’re not doing well.”

His feeling is that most consumers lack the time or the desire to scrutinise and understand the detailed product lifecycle analysis of a pair of shoes or any other item they want to buy. “It’s not that I dislike the term ‘sustainability,’” he adds, “but I think there is a danger of companies over-using it to try to make the consumer feel good. They ‘hero’ one element of a product’s LCA and ignore all other aspects. The manufacturers of some synthetic materials for footwear say their products have a lower carbon footprint than leather. But what are those materials made of? Usually plastic. And what happens at the end of life? Plastic doesn’t biodegrade.”

Boat shoes for every occasion

He says he and Plum Turner decided to launch a boat shoe brand simply because these are the type of shoes both founders like best.



“I’ve always worn them,” Mr Gibson explains, “since I was tiny. They should last ages, and that’s massively appealing, too, that durability, from a sustainability perspective, and on that basis, I love them. They’re the only shoes I take with me when travelling because you can do everything in them, from hiking during the day to going out in the evening.”

Similarly, they both backed the tie-in with the World Land Trust to set up Feet For Feet, ambitious as they are “to do business that will do good”. They say they want this to be “inherent in the business model”, rather than make donations to charitable causes after establishing a profit. “This way, the more we grow, the more we will give back,” Mr Gibson says. He has a sense that many conservation projects seem to target one cause, perhaps just one animal (“often the one with the biggest eyes”). Instead, Two Degrees’ conviction is that it’s habitat that counts. Luke

Boat shoes are good for hiking in the morning and hitting the town in the evening.

 Two Degrees



The shoes use recycled rubber in the sole.

 Two Degrees

Gibson continues: "You can plant trees, but it will take 150 years for those new trees to get to where we need them to be. It's much better to conserve the trees that are already there. They will sequester carbon at a much higher rate. And that's not the only thing that plants are important for. We only really know around 5% of all the plants there are on earth but, even from that relatively small number, we derive about 80% of all the medicines we make."

Plum Turner and he talked long into the night on many occasions before deciding to add their own brand of footwear to all the others already on the market. By the late summer of 2017 they had convinced themselves: people are going to buy shoes anyway and the more people they are able to persuade to buy Two Degrees shoes (instead of the products of brands that are less "environmentally progressive") the better.

Milan plan

Things moved quickly after that, but the biggest debates, Mr Gibson recalls, were around how to pick materials that would allow the two start-up partners to feel confident of being able to maintain their integrity. They found out through a contact in the footwear business that there was an event called Lineapelle at which many footwear upper materials would be on

show under one roof; they packed their bags and set off to visit Milan and the exhibition in early October last year. "I can't tell you how overwhelming it was to walk into Lineapelle on the first day. We visited everyone," he says, "suppliers of leather, of synthetic alternatives, people who make leather fibre and even alternatives like pineapple or mushroom fibre." From here, the Two Degrees founders took a pragmatic approach. They wanted the look and feel of all the materials they looked at to be right for classic boat shoes and concluded that most of the synthetic materials fell at this first hurdle; only one or two synthetics cleared it. From this, they compiled a list of potential suppliers and started testing in earnest.

Stand up to the demands

As well as cost, the criteria on which they placed the greatest importance included performance characteristics such as breathability and durability. Then there were detailed environmental questions to ask, which took a lot of investigation on the part of the Two Degrees team, "charting the journey" of each option, from raw material, to processing to end of life. "Taking all the criteria into account, non-chrome leather, done correctly, achieved the best score," Luke Gibson says. "And, for end of life, we have



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found a supplier in Portugal that can offer us material that will biodegrade in landfill. We recognise that some of the synthetic materials were interesting but, generally, they lost on breathability, durability and ability to be integrated easily into finished product manufacturing processes because many of them weaken when you try to stitch them. The materials from pineapple and mushroom were interesting and quite cool, but we found they did not stand up to the demands of boat shoe manufacture and that they were not going to last. They were not as nice to wear either.”

He says it would have been of great help to the new footwear brand to have been able to find one resource to offer an overview, in a balanced way, of all the different materials available to allow finished product brands to choose. “We had to do that ourselves,” he says. Nevertheless, the companies in Portugal that Two Degrees is now working with are run by “people we know personally and can really trust”. He mentions that the supplier of soling materials, for example, went through 13 or 14 rounds of testing for the brand to find the optimum percentage of recycled rubber to use before coming up with a combination that competes with virgin rubber on performance, but with enhanced environmental progressiveness. 



Founders Luke Gibson and Plum Turner drew up their own materials criteria and found that metal-free leather specially treated to biodegrade easily in landfill post-use scored the highest.

 Two Degrees

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