

# CHANGING THE FABRIC OF LIFE

BY JANE MILBURN

Self-innovation is about being the best you can be. It involves making changes and taking risks.

With a working life based around family commitments, I understand now that I have been constantly self-innovating and upcycling throughout my career. Beginning with an agricultural science degree, this work spans decades of rural reporting, writing and editing, communications and campaigning as well as 10 years in leadership roles with the Rural Press Club of Queensland.

Today I am the founder of Textile Beat and a sustainability consultant working with individuals, groups and governments to influence change in clothing culture, reduce our material footprint, and divert textile resources from landfill.

I have learned from experience that leadership is an action we take, not a position we hold. Our actions speak louder than words – and so do the clothes we wear.

Earlier this year when I met Japanese artisan Akiko Ike in Brisbane we had no language in common, yet the denim

pinny I wore communicated our shared commitment to treasuring natural fibres.

As a result of that meeting, I travelled to Japan to learn about reviving textiles through boro stitching and absorb the SAORI weaving philosophy of celebrating imperfection and expressing ourselves through the garments we make.

Almost everything I wear is handmade or upcycled – not because I can't afford new clothes, rather because I enjoy the creative, individual, mindful and sustainable process of reinvention.

Four years ago when our third (and last) child finished school, I went through a growth process by reflecting on and absorbing lessons from the past then looking forward to align values with work, knowledge and skills before setting off in this new career direction.

I came to understand my core values – which are authenticity, creativity, autonomy and purpose – through professional and personal development gained from the Australian Rural Leadership Program.





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My view is that clothes do for us on the outside what food does on the inside – they nourish and warm our body and soul. In the same way that conscious eaters are sourcing fresh whole food and returning to the kitchen, conscious dressers are seeking to know more about the provenance and ethics of clothing, and are curious about how it is made. Every day we eat and we dress to survive and thrive, and it is not just the style that matters – substance does too.

Fast and processed industrial food has had a dramatic impact on our health in recent years and similarly there has been transformational shift to industrial factory-made clothing, the social and environmental impacts of which we are

only now coming to understand.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation reports that at least one-third of food produced is never eaten and creative solutions are emerging to divert and reduce that waste. In the same way, there is growing evidence that a third of clothing is wasted, with much potential to upcycle and redeploy

it. My purposeful work is bringing awareness to these and other material issues.

More than 90 percent of garments sold in Australia are now made overseas, mostly in Asian factories. Most people buy off-the-rack or online, with very few making anything for themselves to wear.

As a natural-fibre champion, I am troubled that synthetic fibres made from petroleum now dominate the clothing market at a time when research shows these plastic clothes are shedding millions of microplastic particles into the ecosystem with every wash.

To be sustainable, we can borrow from Michael Pollan's guide to eating and say "dressing is an agricultural act" because unless we are wearing natural fibres, we are wearing synthetics derived from petroleum.

I created Textile Beat in 2013 based on social-enterprise principles and began this journey into creativity, empowerment, thrift, sustainability, ecological health and wellbeing – woven with threads of childhood education, professional expertise, networks and nature.

Textile Beat is a platform to discuss ethical issues around clothing culture which include: burgeoning consumption; changing fibres; waste and pollution; modern-day slavery; and a loss of understanding and knowledge about how clothes are made.

In 2014 I undertook an action research project called Sew it Again which won the social media category of the Queensland 2015 Excellence in Rural Journalism Awards, with the judges commenting that it engaged the community, had a call to action, was transformative, and actually "made a difference in the world".

In 2015 I developed the Slow Clothing Manifesto as a summary of 10 ways (think, natural, quality, local, few, care, make, adapt, revive, salvage) to thrive in a material world and began presenting workshops and talks with teachers, local councils and community groups.

During 2016 I implemented The Slow Clothing Project to share stories about Australians choosing to make some of their own clothing, partnered with Brisbane City Council to create ReviveBNE at South Bank as a pop-up preloved fashion event for young people, and presented the figures behind fast-fashion consumption trends at a textile recovery workshop in Sydney.

Continuing to be open to change and taking risks, exciting opportunities are being woven into the 2017 calendar – including a keynote speaker role at the Home Economics Institute of Australia conference in Melbourne.