

# CLOTHES *with meaning*

SLOW FASHION ADVOCATE JANE MILBURN SAYS IT'S TIME WE PAID AS MUCH ATTENTION TO THE ECO-FOOTPRINT OF OUR CLOTHING, AS WE DO TO OUR FOOD.

**G**lobal supply chains are very efficient at meeting our essential food and clothing needs for a handful of dollars – alas, often in a way that disconnects us from the significant humanitarian and environmental damage it wreaks. Fast food, and its twin fast fashion, may be convenient but ultimately they are proving unhealthy and unsatisfying, and in many cases, unethical.

A background in agricultural science and rural advocacy led me to observe the emergence of the Slow Food movement, the return to local and backyard growing, and reconnection with sustainable agriculture as a better source of our food.

In 2008, US author and activist Michael Pollan defined his 'Eater's Manifesto': eat food, not too much, mostly plants. He was inspired by farmer and author Wendell Berry, who described eating as an "agricultural act". Through gardening, cooking and brewing, we can make choices that increase our connection with the source of our food. There is a parallel story with clothing and fibres. In my book *Slow Clothing*, I define the 'Wearer's Manifesto': wear clothes, have few, mostly natural fibres – and believe dressing is an agricultural act (if we want to wear natural fibres rather than plastic ones).

Slow clothing philosophy emerged as a holistic, grassroots response to industrial production and links into many of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. It is about self-empowerment, independent and individual styling through strategic local purchasing, resourceful thinking and actions.

While it is labour intensive and impractical to make all our own fabric, there are things we can do to be more connected to what we wear.

## Handmade and preloved

As a lifelong maker and natural-fibre champion, I was never a slave to fashion. This stems from a childhood on a sheep farm in New Zealand at a time before conspicuous consumption, when handmade skills were still part of everyday practice.

After observing fashion excess in 2011, I went on to set up Textile Beat and explore the benefits of a hands-on approach by upcycling, mending and adapting preloved clothes to keep them in service for longer.

Research shows that extending the life of clothes by just nine months reduces their carbon and water footprint by up to 30 percent. As we grow our skills we

## Joyful clothing

Our clothes do for us on the outside what food does inside. They warm and nourish our bodies, and influence the way we feel and present to the world. This is the essence of slow clothing as antidote to fast fashion. It is about choosing, wearing and caring for garments so they bring value, meaning and joy to every day.



Jane Milburn wearing some of her creations, accompanied by her chooks.

PHOTO: CHARMAINE LYONS



PHOTO: FIONA LAKE

*“Clothes do not fall from the sky and meals do not gush out of the earth. Our food and clothing must come from our own labour.”*

These centuries-old thoughts are from Buddhist scholar Master Zi Bai of the Ming Dynasty and contrast to today when most people outsource food and clothing needs and ‘labour’ in the office instead. I saw the quote on the wall years ago when visiting Chi Lin Nunnery in Hong Kong.

Learning how to sew means you can make, mend and patch your clothes.

(the wearers) can solve problems in our wardrobe and explore our creativity. If you are not a skilled sewist or mender, find a friend who is for advice, or join the many sewing groups popping up around the country.

#### Buy less, and natural

We are buying up to four times what we need because fast fashion has become so affordable. This is due largely to the fact 90 per cent of it is made offshore, where modern-day slavery continues despite the horror of the collapse in 2013 of the Rana Plaza Factory in Bangladesh. It is also ‘cheap’ because there’s been a significant shift to less expensive synthetic fibres derived from petroleum, such as polyester, acrylic and nylon. Two-thirds of clothing is made from these synthetic fibres, which research shows are shedding microplastic fragments into our water and food systems, with as-yet unknown health implications. This is why buying fair trade, organic or natural fabrics, and if possible, local, is so important.

#### Going to waste

When we buy more, we waste more, as the ABC’s *War on Waste* program highlighted, with 6000kg of textiles going to landfill every 10 minutes in Australia. Other figures show Australians are the second-largest consumers of textiles in the world, each buying on average 27kg annually, at the same time as we each send 23kg of textiles and leather to landfill.

Another ethical issue arising from fast fashion culture is the loss of skills and knowledge about where clothes come from, how they are made and from what. The onus is ultimately on conscious consumers to actively seek information from independent sources and to think carefully and ask questions before buying anything (see ‘Resources’ box below).

#### Re-engaging

I’ve found that re-engaging with clothes through acts of mending, making and upcycling, has made me appreciate and value natural fibres as resources. I became mindful through this hands-on process and more interested in local, quality garments made to last. It liberated me from commodification and the endless search for meaning through buying more things.

As conscious consumers we can look beyond appearances, understanding that planetary health is at stake here. There is a resurgent interest in locally-made clothes, of known provenance, using sustainably produced natural or organic fibres such as wool, cotton and linen or cellulosic fibres like bamboo or tencel (wood).

Local manufacturing is re-emerging as small-batch production and made to measure, and there is a marked increase in interest in learning to sew exemplified by the

### Slow Clothing Manifesto

#### 10 WAYS TO REDUCE YOUR MATERIAL FOOTPRINT

1. *Think* – Make thoughtful, ethical, informed choices.
2. *Natural* – Treasure fibres from nature and limit synthetics.
3. *Quality* – Buy well, once; quality remains after price is forgotten.
4. *Local* – Support local makers, those with good stories and fair trade.
5. *Care* – Mend, patch, sort, sponge, wash less, use cold water, line dry
6. *Few* – Live with less, have a signature style, minimal wardrobe, unfollow.
7. *Make* – Learn how to sew as a life skill, value DIY and handmade.
8. *Revive* – Re-wear, re-love, vintage, exchange, op-shop, rent and swap.
9. *Adapt* – Upcycle, refashion, eco-dye, create new from old.
10. *Salvage* – Donate, pass on, rag, weave, recycle and compost.

historic Gardams fabric store returning to pride of place in Brisbane’s Queen Street Mall.

It is important to support local makers and designers when you need new clothing but remember, the most sustainable clothes are those that already exist in your wardrobe or op-shops.

Jane Milburn is a 2019 Churchill Fellow, founder of Textile Beat, member of Fashion Revolution Australia committee and author of *Slow Clothing: Finding meaning in what we wear*.

TURN THE PAGE FOR MORE ON SLOW CLOTHING ➤

#### RESOURCES

- Fashion Revolution: [fashionrevolution.org](http://fashionrevolution.org)
- Ethical Fashion Guide: [baptistworldaid.org.au/resources/2019-ethical-fashion-guide/](http://baptistworldaid.org.au/resources/2019-ethical-fashion-guide/)
- Good On You app: [directory.goodonyou.eco](http://directory.goodonyou.eco)

## Creating together

THE FOLLOWERS OF THE SLOW CLOTHING MANIFESTO ARE A CREATIVE BUNCH. WHO LOVE SHARING THEIR IDEAS WITH OTHERS.

### A growing network

For the past decade, Kate Fletcher has organised a sustainable clothing show in Tasmania as a response to growing awareness of the environmental and social impacts of the global clothing industry.

Kate's individual style is influenced by people at home and abroad, many of whom she has met through the international volunteer program Willing Workers On Organic Farms (WWOOF).

"I am always darning, patching and dyeing fabrics and garments," Kate says. "I often have a number of WWOOFers staying and we create garments together. My motivation is doing whatever it takes to keep garments looking great, in circulation and away from landfill. I also enjoy networking and sharing ideas, skills and resources. We grow things to eat and forage for the dye pot and table. We network and share. I model what I think is important and what works for the planet.

"I have a very eclectic wardrobe, mainly handmade, upcycled, recycled and secondhand clothing. I trade in these things so I have access to a wide variety of raw materials. My most typical raw materials are blankets, sheets, curtains, tablecloths and doilies."

Kate believes fast fashion and the culture of consumerism is sad and soulless. She wants to change people's thinking that it is ok to buy a new garment so cheaply that they can just throw it out without a care.

"That is not smart or sustainable," she says.

"We must create together. The magic of a creative life is sharing it with people you love, then you get to love them even more because of what you shared."

### Supporting locals

With a background in creative expression, Libby Woodhams is an advocate for the healing benefits of making things with our hands: when hands are occupied, enriching conversations somehow happen almost involuntarily.

One of her favourites is her reversible wrap skirt, which enables different looks and is flattering for diverse body shapes. On one side, she used fabric pieces reclaimed from men's merino trousers from an op-shop. The reverse side is a patchwork of hand-painted and block-printed fabrics, scraps from other projects and remnants. To fasten it, she used

an old tie given to her by a retired friend and sewed buttonholes at the different size markers, adding two buttons to accommodate a range of sizes. It's a skirt with a story!

Reflecting on changes in recent decades, Libby says: "I really dislike that globalisation means it doesn't matter where I am in the world, all the shops are the same and all the clothes are the same."

"In my view, it makes it even more important to seek out and support the local designers who are making something different."

Libby's advice is to buy the best sewing machine you can afford because they sew better, last longer, and are easier to use and maintain.

"Buy from a shop where the staff sew and can help with advice, and do the workshop and/or lessons that should come with the purchase of a machine. And, finally, don't be afraid to ask for help even if it seems like a kindergarten problem."

- These two stories are edited extracts from Jane Milburn's *Slow Clothing*.

Below: A sewing group at Reverse Garbage Queensland, in Woolloongabba.



From left: The Indosole factory is in Indonesia; Kyle Parsons.

## The repurposing revolution

LEANNE CROKER DISCOVERS A COMPANY THAT IS TURNING DISCARDED TYRES INTO SHOES TO HELP REDUCE GLOBAL POLLUTION AND CHANGE CONSUMER ATTITUDES.

It's not often a broken shoe leads to a creative solution to a global problem. But that's exactly what happened to Kyle Parsons. He went from a broken pair of thongs on the streets of Bali, to founding the company Indosole that makes stylish footwear from recycled tyres. Not quite a total solution to a problem that stems from 1.5 billion tyres that turn up as waste every year – but a successful beginning that Parsons hopes will make people think about what they buy and wear.

Standing barefoot on the sidewalk of Seminyak in 2004, Parsons went in search of shoes that weren't made from plastic and were representative of Bali. He ended up buying a pair of thongs with a sole made of tyre, which he'd never seen before.

"What I learned is that the Indonesian people are really resourceful and naturally talented at turning trash into treasure and art, anything to give it a new life," Parsons explains. "I did some research into tyre pollution and what it meant. I wanted to understand on a global level if there really was a problem. And I found there was – these days there's billions of tyres ending up in landfill or in the ocean and on the land."

The next step was to turn a local product into a global solution, using ethical and environmentally aware production methods.

After a great deal of research, Parsons and his colleagues developed a way to repurpose rubber tyres sourced from landfills, mechanic garages, and gutters from all around Bali

and other islands of Indonesia. The tyres are ground into a powder that is used to make the soles of their footwear.

Parsons says the company is not just about making ethical footwear, they want to change people's attitudes.

"The biggest impact we like to see is just getting people thinking," he says. "If Indosole is a catalyst to get someone thinking on a more conscious level about the products they buy and wear – our goal is that they will implement that in other areas of their life."

Indosole is now a 'Certified B Company,' having gone through a lengthy certification process which proves that throughout their business they consider the impact of their decision on their workers, customers, suppliers, community and the environment.

"B Corp is a very valuable mark for us; one we worked very hard to achieve. It took us about a year and half to actually get everything in order and to qualify for B Corp," Parson explains. "It is something we really cherish – it is also a mark of comfort for our consumers so that when they go to our website or find our tag in a local retailer they know that we are doing what we say we're doing and that rings true not only for the environmental aspect but also the working conditions in our factory so that they have fair working conditions."

For more information visit: [indosole.com.au](http://indosole.com.au)

\*Certified B Company: [bcorporation.com.au](http://bcorporation.com.au)