Eco-friendly fabrics tough to spot

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If variety is the spice of life, then many of us could benefit from a little seasoning when it comes to our linens and wardrobe.

Eco-textiles expert Kate Fletcher, in her new book Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys, describes how today's fashion and textile industry continues to be dominated by a large number of similar products in a limited range of fibres.

Fletcher writes that "cotton and polyester together account for over 80 per cent of the global market in textiles."

While organic cotton and recycled polyester, and alternative fibres - hemp, bamboo, soy - are increasingly available, Fletcher says it is important to recognize that "no one fibre, regardless of whether it is organic, fairly traded or recycled, can single-handedly transform the practices of a polluting and resource-intensive industry into a more sustainable one."

Just as eating organic corn and wheat is better for us (and the environment), overreliance on these crops ignores the importance of a diverse diet, and, like conventional agriculture, can create unwanted and/or unforeseen effects for human health and the environment.

THE WHOLE PICTURE

Despite the growing awareness and development of organic and alternative textiles, Fletcher says there continues to be confusion about the impacts of textile production.

In general, synthetic fibres are often seen as "bad" and natural fibres as "good." This belief is influenced by a number of factors, including perceptions about material renewability and biodegradability, as well as associations about chemicals and pollution.

But the truth is complicated. For example, organic cotton cultivation largely solves the problems associated with chemicals used in conventional cotton production. According to Oxfam, however, organic cotton is still one of the top "thirsty" crops, meaning it can lead to soil salinization, aquifer depletion and desertification.
Fletcher reports that the cultivation of one kilogram of cotton draws on as much as 8,000 litres water. In contrast, while the production of one kilogram of polyester requires twice the energy as cotton (and uses oil, a non-renewable resource), the process uses little or no water.

The Sustainable Furniture Council, a North Carolina-based industry association formed to promote sustainable practices, advises consumers to look for textiles that are "organic fabrics," not simply fabrics made from organic fibres. There can be a significant difference between sheets that are labelled organic cotton and those that are organic textiles. While the raw materials of the former may have been grown in an ecofriendly way, only with the latter can consumers be sure that the production was, too.

It is estimated, for example, that the fabric covering an average sofa requires around 500 gallons of water and between 1.81 and 9.07 kilograms of chemicals - scouring materials, bleaches, dyes - many of which cause health problems in humans.

LOOK FOR LABELS

As with other industries, competing textile certifications have cropped up to qualify eco-claims. The Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), Blue Sign, Cradle to Cradle, Green Guard, the EU Eco-Label or Flower, and Oeko-Tex are some of the most common, with both GOTS and Blue Sign including fair trade and workers' rights considerations.

Multiple certification systems can be confusing, but the Sustainable Furniture Council argues that because so few fabrics are certified right now, supporting any of them "lifts all boats."

Even just asking suppliers about the use of certain materials in the fabrics will help shift the industry. Were the detergents biodegradable? Were the chemicals non-carcinogenic and the dyes natural or low-impact?

REVIVING THE FUTURE

More manufacturers are seeing the eco-friendly market as a way of staying at the industry forefront.

Just last month, new products such as recycled cotton and organically-dyed cashmere - as well as a revolutionary treatment to make wool shrink-resistant without using chemicals - were showcased at a trade fair in Paris.

Alternative textile development is also helping to revive regional textile traditions. For example, in Italy - once one of the world's most important sources for textiles - the National Research Council is collaborating with fashion design firms to update traditional natural fibre textiles such as those made from broom, hemp, flax and wool from native sheep.

NETTLE KNICKERS, OTHER NOTABLES

Sustainable textiles suppliers, such as Seattle-based 0 Ecotextiles, offer
customers responsibly grown and processed natural fibres, such as hemp, bamboo, flax (linen) and abaca.

A growing range of innovative fibres is also available. How about fabric made from cork, or knickers and sheets made from stinging nettles? Nettle textiles are said to be similar to linen and ramie, naturally anti-bacterial and mould resistant.

There is even a guide on making yarn from dog fur.

For information, check out 0 Ecotextiles, at oecotextiles.com, or Knitting with Dog Hair, by Kendall Crolius and Ann Montgomerv.

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