

My fashion footprint: Is your wardrobe bad for the planet?

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Phil Patterson is not your average wardrobe consultant. For a start, he's clueless about designer labels, trends and fashion in general. He refers to "textiles" rather than clothes. His advice will, at best, raise eyebrows and, at worst, induce cardiac arrest among the fashion conscious and can be summed up as follows: wear antimicrobial socks because they needn't be washed after use and the perfect wardrobe staple is anything made from Eucalyptus trees. Perhaps the only area with which he wouldn't come to blows with a fashionista is a mutual disregard for Lycra.

Thank goodness, then, that Phil's visit to my house isn't an attempt to fashion me forward. Instead, after rummaging through my closet, Phil will rate my clothes using his "textile ecometric". I'll then be the very first person to have a number of Environmental Damage Units, or EDUs, attached to my wardrobe.



Sound a bit grim? Behind its glossy veneer, the truth is that the business of fashion and clothing, from production, to consumption, care and disposal, is among the world's most environmentally damaging. Ninety per cent of our clothes are imported, and it's not just the children labouring in sweatshop conditions we may not see – it's the 2 million tons of waste, 3.1 million tons of CO₂ and 70 million tons of waste water that the industry produces in a single year.

Enter Phil who, after 10 years managing clothes dyeing, printing and finishing at Marks & Spencer, took off with his own initiative, Colour Connections, set up last year. Phil claims that dyeing is one of the most environmentally harmful steps in the clothes making process, and his consultancy advises manufacturers and retailers on becoming more energy efficient, less wasteful and less toxic.

A label won't ever tell you how much energy, waste and water went into making an item of clothing. But, as Phil says, just in the dyeing process, water use can range wildly from a best-case scenario of 80 litres per kilo of fabric to a sloppy and careless 800 litres. But the story doesn't end when clothes reach the racks. It's what we buy and how we care for and dispose of our clothes that can dictate a garment's full environmental footprint. I'm intrigued to know what my score is, but I hardly expected anything more than an emphatic thumbs up from Phil. And I was wrong.

We begin by analysing everything I've purchased over the past year. With laptop in hand, the screen presents an exhaustive list of clothing types to choose from, from cotton socks to jeans to silk shirts to wool suits. Having been in maternity clothes for 12 months, it's easy enough to remember what I've bought, although I need to think hard when it comes to household linen. I can count on one hand the number of clothes my husband's bought this year, even though he's a style-conscious Italian.

Admittedly, this is what differentiates us from the "average" household where a woman buys 34 new items of clothes a year, a figure that has nearly doubled in the past decade. What makes this possible is that, in that same time, the average cost of clothes has dropped by 36 per cent, with £1 in every £4 now spent on bargain fashion. Retailers exacerbate our obsession with "newness" by producing up to 20 different clothing collections a year. In this constantly revolving carousel, getting on the clothing treadmill has become too easy.

The next part is where I get into trouble. Over the following screens, I answer a rapid-fire set of questions. How many clothing washes do I do a week? About one wash a day. At what temperature? 40 degrees (I don't have a 30 degree setting). How many times do I tumble dry a week? None, we don't even have a tumble dryer. What about ironing? About seven hours a week. Phil gasps...

A couple clicks of the mouse, then a figure appears at the bottom of the screen. Our household EDUs is 1,282. A breakdown shows that our actual clothing EDUs is quite low at 558. But then there's the laundry, which at 724 EDUs is slightly alarming. It includes 324 from washing and a whopping 400 from ironing.

The ironing is what did us in, more environmentally damaging than our washing. "It's like having the kettle switched on for seven hours straight," says Phil. But more shocking, if we add seven tumble-dryer loads a week. The figure more than doubles.

Phil kicks in, "From an energy point of view, it's good to wash lower, but the difference between 30 degrees and 40 degrees is small. The difference between tumble drying and not tumble drying, is huge." According to Phil, a more average household, with more purchases per year and four hours per week tumble drying, would have a score somewhere in the ballpark of 1,900.

Most of my kids' clothes have come to us second-hand. How does that figure in the ecometric? Second-hand clothes, he says, incur only half the EDUs. Equally, if you give away your cast-off clothes to be worn by someone else you get half the production EDU's back for reducing demand for a new item.

This is another area where the national wardrobe is setting off alarm bells. The vast majority of our cast-offs don't get a second lease on life and are just chucked in the bin. More than one million tons ending up buried in landfill in 2005. Phil's ecometric favours quality over quantity. "If you currently buy 50 cotton T-shirts a year, at £2 each, and throw them all away, moving to buy 10 high-quality and higher-priced T-shirts will make a huge environmental impact."

The other problem with cheap clothes is their simply not economical to maintain. Less than two per cent of our clothing budget goes on things that will extend the life of a garment – such as repair and mending. Yet, as Phil says, even turning them into rags "...means you're not buying cleaning cloths – which also need to be made, bleached, dyed and transported."

So far, so clear. But then I ask him about choosing "greener" clothes, and it gets complicated. "Take Lycra, it's revolutionised people's wardrobes, it makes fabrics comfortable and reduces irons – but you can't recycle it as it melts and sticks to the yarn of the fabric." The same is true for non-iron finishes – it's very difficult to recover the fibre "because they're covered in glue". Yuck.

Phil's favourite fabric is Lyocell [trademarked name Tencel] "It is the most sustainable fabric. It's made from eucalyptus plantations, which produce more fibre per acre than, say, cotton. There are no pesticides and processing and dyeing Lyocell is relatively clean."

The big message from Phil's visit is: I already have a "sustainable wardrobe" in the sense that my hard-earned cash is spent on necessities and not fashion. Having said that, I need not feel guilty shopping for clothes, so long as they are bought, ideally, with the idea of passing them on to my daughter. So the glossies' endless "must-haves" and much of the low-budget retailers' offerings are essentially out of the equation.

A full morning of soul-bearing leaves me feeling a bit devilish. Later on, I indulge a strong urge to browse for clothes online and to my surprise, discover that Marc Jacobs and Philip Lim both make clothes from Lyocell. Fashion may just be catching up with Phil Patterson.

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Textile ecometric can be found on www.ecotextile.com

How to detox your clothing

* Line dry instead of tumble dry to drastically reduce clothing environmental impact

- * Wash at low temperatures using environmentally friendly detergent and iron only where necessary – ironing uses large amounts of energy
- * Make do and mend. Prolong the lifespan of a garment by finding a local tailor or buying a sewing kit to fix rips and lost buttons. Dry cleaners often offer low-cost repairs
- * Never chuck clothes in the bin. Gift them to charity, pass them on or turn them into cleaning rags
- * See new clothes as an investment. Pay more for higher quality clothes that will last season after season