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What should I wear?

Simon Webster
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THE image of an eco-warrior flouncing about in a tie-dyed kaftan is a demeaning stereotype that Dilemmas feels must be tackled. A sophisticated, 21st century, professional greenie would not flounce; he or she would stride, as purposefully as their kaftan would allow.

If the kaftan were cotton it would be organic. Conventionally grown cotton has long been criticised for its intensive pesticide use, which has been blamed for impoverishing and damaging the health of millions of farmers, particularly in the Third World.

The cotton industry says it has reduced pesticide use by introducing genetically modified cotton, but critics say this has opened up a whole new world of pain for farmers and the environment - and that in many cases pesticide use hasn't even gone down.


GM crops will be dealt with in more detail in another column. In the meantime, it is worth noting that organic cotton sales went up more than 80 per cent in both 2006 and 2007, according to the Organic Exchange, a US organic cotton industry group.

However, even organic cotton isn't perfect. It can be a thirsty crop, and as designers and manufacturers seek sustainability (or merely the eco-dollar, depending on your level of cynicism) other fabrics are being hailed as sustainable saviours.

They include vegetarian silk (made by allowing silkworms to live their full life cycles, rather than boiling them alive), bamboo, hemp, cork, wood pulp, corn, stinging nettles and soy fabric, made from the recycled leftovers of tofu manufacturing. Apparently it feels like cashmere.


Hemp appears to be a legitimate eco-fabric. It grows using no pesticides and limited water and returns a lot of organic matter back to the soil. However, the jury's out on fabrics such as bamboo. As a plant it's great, requiring no pesticides, but turning it into a pair of undies usually involves heavy chemical use or lots of energy, says the excellent organicclothing.blogspot.com.

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Good old-fashioned wool, of course, is a wonderful renewable resource when it's organic - made without all the chemical drips, drenches, cleaners and irresponsible land use that can feature in conventional production.

Ideally, we would avoid new clothes where possible, instead stocking our wardrobes with pre-loved items from op shops and retro stores.

Sue Thomas, a lecturer in fashion at the school of architecture and design, RMIT University, sees old and new joining forces in a sustainable, yet chic future.

"Trends will always come and go but the way we interpret those trends can change," she says. "People are integrating old clothes with new. People are swapping clothes. The idea that 'new is good' is becoming less important."

Rather than go shopping along Oxford Street, revolutionary eco-fashionistas have begun gathering in inner-city locations in order to swap frocks at nights hosted by a group called the Clothing Exchange. Originally a Melbourne thing, it has just started up in Sydney. See www.clothingexchange.com.au.

Being happy with the clothes you've got would be the best way to reduce your wardrobe's footprint. If they tear, fix them. Kids today need to learn how to sew, darn it.

Owning fewer clothes would also be a noble ambition. When looking for fashion inspiration, think Mahatma Gandhi rather than Imelda Marcos.

We also need to learn to do our laundry better. A 2006 Cambridge University study found that polyester T-shirts had a smaller footprint than cotton ones, and that 60 per cent of the greenhouse gases generated over the life of a typical cotton T-shirt came from washing and drying it.

However, the study was based on the idea that cotton garments are washed at high temperatures, machine dried and ironed.

As if any good greenie would own an iron.

Do you have a green dilemma? Email swebster@fastmail.com.au

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/07/29/1217097241085.html>