

In the whimsical, wasteful world of fashion, one Kiwi designer is out to make a material difference. From worm farms to organic cotton, Kate Sylvester's eco-friendly makeover is far from cosmetic. She tells **Katie Newton** how a cheap broolly inspired her to make the planet her business

# moral fibre

**It all started last summer** when Kate Sylvester inadvertently bought a shonky sun umbrella. She was stocking up on supplies for the family camping holiday, and it cost her \$7.99. At the time, she didn't realise that she'd bought a lemon with a broken latch. Nor did she realise she'd set a series of events in motion that would see organic cotton, peace lilies and a bin of wriggling worms infiltrate the Auckland premises of Kate Sylvester HQ.

The designer connects the dots: "We were on the first day of our holiday and I got out this \$7.99 umbrella to put up on the beach. It didn't work, it was ridiculously flimsy. We ended up fighting with this thing, and had to strap all this stuff around it to make the stupid thing hold up. And for the rest of the holiday, every time I went to the beach I looked around and saw people fighting with these damned \$7.99 umbrellas."

She began to notice the useless brollies stuffed in rubbish bins. Her conscience was pricked. "I thought, 'How many thousands and thousands and thousands of these damned beach umbrellas are just going to end up in landfills before the end of summer?' I had this kind of monstrous vision of this hideous pile-up of disposable junk. The rabid consumerism of it all – it was so out of control. You just can't sell a sun umbrella for \$7.99. Think about it! Something has gone wrong somewhere. If we're not paying the money, then down the line somewhere people aren't getting paid the money."

Sylvester's conscience twinged again when a fabric supplier asked if she was interested in using organic cotton. Around the same time, her sponsor Peugeot offered to swap her petrol car for one of its new low-emission diesels. Over the long, hot summer while their kids played in her backyard pool, she discussed the three omens at length with her good friend and neighbour, Maike Blackman. A

life-long greenie with a background in environmental activism, Blackman brimmed with ideas about how Sylvester could change the way she produced her clothing; an activity which, short of clear-felling rainforests or setting up a P lab, turns out to be among the most potentially damaging that one could undertake.

That potential is something of which Sylvester became keenly aware. "When the supplier first offered us organic cotton I was a bit horrified by it," she admits. "I mean, looking at our industry I thought, what is the point? The whole industry is just so wrong. It's all loaded with chemicals; it's all exploitative... it's like this seething mass of wrongness. It seemed all a bit too hypocritical to just slip some organic cotton in." Blackman responded to Sylvester's hand-wringing by suggesting they break the business down into a series of manageable chunks and look at whether each chunk was operating in a sustainable manner. They would celebrate it when it was, and make changes when it wasn't. Their neighbourly chats became formalised into plans and Blackman was hired as an environmental consultant. Sylvester swapped her car and ordered the organic cotton.

Of all the changes the designer has made since last summer, the most personally important has been her pledge to keep manufacturing at home. Ninety-eight percent of Kate Sylvester clothing is made locally, and she's still searching for viable alternative methods to produce in New Zealand that last bit of knitwear that is currently done offshore. It's a more expensive route, but she needs to do something to help keep her expert pleater from having to mow lawns on the side.

And for Sylvester, it's not just about nurturing the local industry that has served her so well, but ensuring labour conditions for workers are fair, the chain

PHOTOGRAPHS: JESSIE CASSON



Kate Sylvester: "The whole industry is just so wrong."

of supply is traceable and the factories aren't going to get away with pumping toxic waste into the waterways.

With partner Wayne – creative director of the company – she has penned an open letter to let people know how they intend to run their business from now on. “As parents,” it begins, “a big concern for us is the kind of future we’re creating for our children...” It ends with the couple promising to keep the pursuit of sustainability a permanent part of their business plan.

With just half a year of concerted effort, Kate Sylvester Ltd now runs on carbon-neutral Meridian Energy and Fair Trade coffee. The computers are on a group hibernate and the loo is cleaned with products from Eco Store. Peace lilies suck pollutants out of the air and trips in the company van are planned to ensure the least circuitous route is used. Fabric scraps are taken to the local kindly or donated to quilt makers at the Cancer Society; paper is printed on both sides before being recycled. Broken clothes hangers go back to the supplier to be ground down to make new ones. The 20-strong staff feed their leftover lunch to the worms, and half have ordered bins for their homes. The two big skips of rubbish that used to be removed from the building every month have become one, and that amount is constantly reducing, like a flavoursome jus. And the beauty of it all is that the extra cost of items such as recycled paper and organic cotton are offset by savings in areas like lower electricity use and waste output.

There's more. As part of Blackman's three-part plan, all of the company's suppliers have been contacted to check their policies on sustainability – those that had them have been kept on, those that didn't have been encouraged to develop them. Those that scoffed at the thought, like the printer whom Blackman describes as “hopelessly old-school,” have been cut loose. Accounts have been opened with businesses that supply recycled paper and organic merino, and with services that ensure safe disposal of old fluorescent light bulbs and toner cartridges from the printer. If you were to visit Sylvester at home of an evening, chances are you'd find one of our most internationally successful fashion designers patching her children's torn trousers instead of buying new ones.

But for all those Kate Sylvester fans who fear her next collection is going to be all hemp and hair shirts, a beautiful new five-piece organic cotton range is about to be launched in her stores. Next season, there'll be an even bigger collection of organic merino. This new line won't be “ghetto-ised” (her word) or produced as a diffusion line. It'll be right there on the racks amidst the upscale party dresses, ready for a sales assistant to put into a locally printed, recycled-paper carry bag that won't be replaced with a new design each season.

If you think it all sounds exhausting, Sylvester would be the first to agree. “It was absolutely essential to have Maike on board,” she says. “We're a small company and if we'd tried to do it all while juggling our jobs and our own roles it would have been too hard, too daunting. This way, I can't believe how much we've been able to do, and so easily. As an individual, you shuffle off to the supermarket with your green reusable bag and you do feel like, ‘Is this really going to make a difference in the big picture?’ But as a company we can make a noticeable difference.”

Sylvester believes consumers can make a difference, too, that everyone should consider what their equivalent of the \$7.99 umbrella is, and then refuse

**Sylvester's organic merino collection won't be “ghettoised”... it'll be right there on the racks amidst the party dresses, ready to be put into a locally printed, recycled carrier bag**



Kate Sylvester organic cotton Vera tank, \$165, and Nancy rompers, \$175

to buy it – instead buy less, buy quality, buy local. “It's been a point of pride to see our clothing worn years and years and years after it was first made,” she says, “and we've always tried to transcend the disposability of fashion.”

When I spoke to Sylvester and Blackman, both of whom I would describe as considered, non-hysterical types, each told me a version of the same story. It

had upset them both so much that I went home and read it on the web for myself. It was about the waterways in the Mexican city of Tehuacán, which are constantly coloured blue by the discharge of dyes from denim laundries that put the finishing touches on American jeans destined for export. The local farmers are getting sick and can't plant tomatoes and root vegetables. Some days the blue slick out to sea is apparently visible from space.

But then I found a more shocking horror story. It came courtesy of one of the most fearsomely good magazine writers in the English language – travel writer and restaurant critic A A Gill. Over lunch at The Ivy one day, Gill

was dared to do a travel story on the worst place in the world. He found it in Uzbekistan, and cotton again was to blame. “The Kara-Kalpaks can boast the Biggest Ecological Disaster in the World, Ever” reads his essay *The Fatal Shore*. “Nothing else, no smoking rainforest, no solitary carnivore, no home-country ring road, comes close to the majesty of this disaster. Not just the biggest, but

the fastest... They've managed to drain the Aral Sea, the fourth biggest inland lump of water on the globe, and they've done it in 20 years." The task was begun by the Soviets, then taken up by the Uzbeks themselves, diverting once-mighty tributaries to irrigate vast tracts of land for cotton fields. One of the thirstiest crops on the planet, cotton has contributed to the desertification of large areas of land on just about every continent.

The bit of Uzbekistan that Gill visited, where the Aral Sea once was, is disease-ridden and encrusted with salt and poisonous chemicals. This is because, despite cotton accounting for just three percent of the world's cropping area, it is sprayed with almost 25 percent of the world's agricultural insecticides and 10 percent of its pesticides. The World Health Organisation estimates 20,000 people die every year because of pesticide poisoning. It's not a stretch to guess that a great number of those are cotton farmers.

These sobering figures have led to a growing demand worldwide for pesticide- and insecticide-free, non-genetically modified cotton. Currently, it accounts for less than one percent of all cotton production, but the figure rises every year. Sylvester sees using it as the first baby step towards making her entire clothing range sustainable. "You start to look into things," she says, "and you find out you're better off buying synthetic fabric that's produced in a safe sustainable mill than buying natural cotton that's been blasted with pesticides. That's not what you'd expect when you take things at face value. The organic cotton change has been crucial."

It's a sentiment that is resonating with retailers around the world, particularly in the UK. There, you can buy organic cotton ranges not just in eco-chic havens such as Notting Hill boutiques, but in Marks & Spencer and Tesco. Globally, big brands such as Levi's, Nike and American Apparel have started introducing the fabric into their main lines, setting themselves targets to increase usage.

And it's not just organic cotton that's becoming sought after, but ethical fashion as a whole. This year's sold-out "it" bag that caused shopping mayhem throughout the northern hemisphere wasn't a rare leather showpiece from Fendi or Hermès, but a re-usable Anya Hindmarch tote with I'm Not a Plastic Bag scrawled up the side. The original fashion activist, Katharine Hamnett, is cool again; and never wanting to be caught napping, *Vogue* has done an ethical fashion spread.

While sceptics may well question the real worth of all these things, there's no denying that a large sector of the fashion world is moving away from its former core way of thinking: consume the new, dispose of the old and don't ask the hard questions lest you get frown lines.

In comparison, New Zealand has been slow on the uptake. Perhaps it is naivety, or some quixotic idea that our native bush and snow-capped mountains will somehow save us. But while every second urban baby seems to be luxuriating in organic cotton romper suits printed with non-toxic vegetable dyes, fashionable adults have seriously limited choices when it comes to clothes.



Try buying a pair of environmentally friendly shoes or asking a shop assistant where their store sources its cotton from. Prepare to be met with blank stares.

Back at Kate Sylvester HQ, the designer is well aware that her crusade is just beginning. "The thing we found is that you can't change everything overnight," she says ruefully. "It's enormous, like Pandora's Box. You lift the lid a little bit and all this stuff just comes roaring out. If we were to say overnight, 'Okay that's it; we're going to be completely green and ethical', the business would go under."

Instead, as part of Blackman's long-term plan, the company will aim to be completely carbon-neutral within three to four months. Within six they want to implement triple bottom line accounting, where a business's worth and success are not based just on turnover and profit, but incorporate a tri-fold consideration of people, planet and profit, as Blackman puts it. Within one year, they aim to gain third-party recognition and

be awarded the Green Tick, a New Zealand-born international eco-labelling system which certifies products as environmentally sustainable.

But, says Sylvester, her journey is far from finished: "With the road that we're on now, we certainly don't see there'll be a time where we can say 'Okay, that's enough, we'll stop'. It's an ongoing evolution that I don't see ending."

Strange and wonderful consequences can occur when one broken umbrella flaps its wings on a beach. ■

#### WHERE TO GET ETHICAL FASHION IN NZ

- **Kate Sylvester:** The High Summer five-piece organic cotton collection of luxe sporty pieces also features recycled buttons. [www.katesylvester.com](http://www.katesylvester.com)
- **Untouched World:** With a company-wide commitment to sustainable business practice, Untouched World has the widest range of organic clothing around. The range features organic cotton, jersey, denim and mountainsilk (fine merino from sheep that have not been mulesed, ie, had their skin sheared), alongside environmentally friendly bamboo fabric. [www.untouchedworld.co.nz](http://www.untouchedworld.co.nz)
- **Workshop Denim:** Both the men's and women's straight-legged jeans are made from undyed organic yarn that is bio-washed to give a naturally worn-in feel. [www.workshop.co.nz](http://www.workshop.co.nz)
- **Karen Walker:** Walker has started stocking the new range of Levi's Eco jeans in her stores and has further projects in the pipeline. [www.karenwalker.com](http://www.karenwalker.com)
- **Terra Plana:** Its footwear features vegetable-tanned leather and recycled rubber soles and was named 2007's Ethical Fashion Product of the Year by *The Observer* newspaper. It is now available in New Zealand. [www.terraplana.com](http://www.terraplana.com)
- **Nature Baby:** Earth mothers in Auckland's trendy Grey Lynn have been clothing their kiddies in organic cotton kimono tops and sleep cocoons for years. [www.naturebaby.co.nz](http://www.naturebaby.co.nz)