

Two local companies are clothing the masses and protecting the Earth via their 'sustainable fashion' lines.

Dressing for earth



Stories by ELIZABETH TAI
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IN the fashion world, last season's hot trends are today's passé junk to be given away, or worse, tossed in the landfill. "Fast fashion" has created customers used to disposable fashion and an industry that relies on cheap labour, fabrics that are often not eco-friendly and manufacturing practices that are damaging to the environment. However, some designers are working hard to make fashion "sustainable".

"Sustainable fashion" is a broad term. It does not just mean using fabrics that are created from environmentally-friendly methods or using manufacturing processes that won't damage the Earth. It also encompasses issues such as Fair Trade – ensuring that workers who create these garments are paid adequately and work in humane conditions. It also concerns educating consumers to buy and use their clothes in a more sustainable way.

Kate Fletcher, a British designer, writer, consultant, and Reader at the Centre of Sustainable Fashion at London College of Fashion, has coined the word "slow fashion", where the fashion world creates clothes on a set of values that will benefit the world in a more positive way.

"Slow fashion is not a descriptor of speed in the industry, but a different world view that promotes a variety of fashion production and consumption, and that celebrates the pleasure and cultural significance of fashion within biophysical limits," she said in an interview with environmental website Take Part.

But creating sustainable fashion is a difficult and often tedious process as it means overhauling the entire clothes-making process, from conceptualising to manufacturing. Still, two Malaysian companies have taken this challenge.

Ultra

Anita Hawkins, 26, and Tengku Chanela Jamidah, 27, met at an airport in Perth 10 years ago. Little did they know that that fateful encounter would lead to a shared passion in sustainable living and eventually a business partnership.

A busy creative consultant based in Shanghai, Hawkins became aware of how modern living was damaging the environment a few years ago. Chanela became interested in the subject when she had



Eco-fabric: A draped jacket of Tencel knit with leather shoulders by Ultra. Green designers go for 'sustainable' fabrics made from wood pulp, hemp and bamboo or from recycled plastic bottles, 'upcycled' fabric scraps and 'repurposed' material like military parachutes.

a child, and realised that she didn't want her child to be exposed to toxic substances. The two became really passionate about the subject, but felt that there was a lack of products and the information about sustainable living was inadequate.

Therefore, three years ago the two started a blog about sustainable products and services and later began selling their own line of organic bathcare products. Last year, the two decided to branch out into fashion.

"We wanted to change people's perception of eco-fashion, from treehugger styles into more modern, ready-to-wear contemporary kind of feel," said Chanela.

Together with designers Jonathan Liang and Tengku Syahmi, they created the sustainable fashion line Ultra. They released their first collection last September and are now about to release their fourth collection. Their collections have been met with enthusiasm overseas; they have showed them in expos and trade shows in Paris, Colombo, Hong Kong and will show in London in October this year. Ultra does not have a physical store yet – they hope to launch it at the end of this year – but their collections

are being stocked in Paris, Jakarta and Singapore, and they are getting customers from China, Taiwan, Australia and Europe via their online store at www.wearultra.com.

The two describe sustainable businesses as something that "create something that benefits and enhances the future" instead of creating products that are "fast, disposable and wasteful".

Still, Hawkins and Chanela acknowledge that it's difficult to be 100% sustainable as it'll become too expensive and not as accessible.

"It's an ideal but it's not realistic," said Hawkins.

Ultra uses a variety of sustainable fabrics such as Tencel, bamboo, soy fibre, organic cotton and recycled polyester, chiffon and Georgette, and even freshwater salmon skin, all of which they try to source from within the Asian region. Ultra also recycles fabrics from previous collections. They are also looking into sources for natural dyes using herbs and other plants. Customers are encouraged to return their old garments for recycling.

They use quite a bit of recycled polyester (fabric that has been re woven) and recycled PET (from



The co-founders of sustainable fashion brand Ultra, Anita Hawkins (left) and Tengku Chanela Jamidah, aim to create clothes that last.

plastic bottles that have been processed into fibres and woven into fabric). The salmon skin, a food industry waste, was discovered in their research for sustainable materials. It feels like light leather and is usually used for wallets, bags and sometimes shoes but Ultra uses it mainly for detailing, panels and ties.

The whole process has been a challenging and eye-opening affair for the Ultra team. Most ethical brands create basics such as T-shirts and pants, but Ultra clothes are futuristic and modern, and it was a challenge to use sustainable fabrics to create them.

"There weren't many (sustainable fabrics) available to us. We wanted to source them within the region. Also the pricing of the fabric has an effect on the retail price which makes it much more expensive. But we're slowly trying to source for new materials as the industry grows along with us," said Chanela.

Ultra creates the designs and samples in-house at their workshop at Solaris Dutamas, Kuala Lumpur, and manufacture the clothes locally. Their clothes reflect their desire to

create high-quality clothes that are not just sustainable material-wise, but are fashionable for long periods of times.

"We're all into vintage but not fast fashion," said Chanela, referring to the cheap, disposable, high-volume fashion found at most high-street stores. "We think of a piece that could last long term. A piece that you could use for the whole year to discourage disposable fashion."

In order to create such "long-lived" pieces, the design is very important. In comes Ultra 10, a collection of 10 items, that constitutes an entire wardrobe for a year, and will prompt people to think about their wardrobe choices. The collection, which was launched in May in Shanghai, costs RM2,600 per set, though you can buy it piece by piece. The most expensive item of the collection is a RM500 "three-in-one" jacket.

"(The pieces are) modular and interchangeable. Everything is in neutral tones, very easy to mix

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Food for thought

Sustainable fashion is the new buzzword but is there really such a thing? Fashion involves always changing and updating to keep up with the latest trend – which means buying and discarding. So how can that be ecologically sustainable?



MODERN fabrics such as polyester and nylon are often created via environmentally-damaging processes and are not biodegradable. Fashion doesn't have to rely on these fabrics – there are eco-friendlier options out there:

> **Hemp** – This plant grows fast (up to 3m a year) and is really hardy and does not need pesticides to grow well. Nor does it need much fertilisers as the plant's roots penetrate deep into the soil to draw out minerals. It can grow anywhere, enriches the soil and doesn't need much water. It's a wonder plant of sorts, but hemp is not comfortable to wear, and has a reputation for being "dowdy".

> **Organic cotton** – Conventional cotton requires a cocktail of chemicals and large amounts of water to grow. Organic cotton may not use as much pesticides, but according to online environmental website *The Ecologist*, the crop requires 1,165 litres of water to make a single T-Shirt.

> **Bamboo** – Although it is a thirsty plant, bamboo grows fast and is hardy – therefore, it does not need fertilisers. Bamboo fabric is soft and highly absorbent and is said to have anti-bacterial properties.

> **Nettle yarn** – People have been

Eco-friendly fabrics



Hemp fibre is durable, versatile and UV-resistant. The plant requires no irrigation and fewer chemical fertilisers and pesticides than cotton.

wearing fabric made from nettle for millenia but it fell out of fashion with the arrival of cotton. Nettle plants are resistant to disease and vermin, so they do not need pesticides. The yarn is made from the stems, not the prickly leaves that will give you quite an itch.

> **Recycled polyester** – This oil-based, non-biodegradable fabric is created via a highly toxic, environmentally-damaging process, so it doesn't seem like a candidate for being an "eco-friendly fabric". However, some manufacturers are recycling polyester products

such as plastic bottles into fabric. Proponents argue that this has redirected polyester products from the landfill.

> **Lyocell** – This is created when cellulose from wood pulp is broken down chemically into a sludge that is reformed into fibres. The process leaves little impact on the environment and doesn't use much energy or water. It is also called "Tencel", a brand name owned by Lenzing Group of Austria.

> **Soy fabric** – Also dubbed "vegetable cashmere", this fabric is made from leftovers in the soy food industry such as soy hulls. It is biodegradable, and the fabric is soft and easy to care for. As it easily absorbs dyes, it thus requires less of it. The only disadvantage, however, is that it is not as hardy as hemp or cotton.

> **Upcycled fabrics** – To "upcycle" is to create something of high quality from recycled materials. Many innovative designers or companies such as British brand From Somewhere, have created beautiful clothes from discarded fabrics, thus diverting fabric scraps from landfills.

■ Sources: *The Ecologist*, *Wikipedia* and *organicclothing.blogs.com*.

Global effort

THERE are fashion designers and producers around the world who are taking steps to make their clothes "sustainable".

Discarded fabric is gold to some designers. From Somewhere is the brainchild of Orsola de Castro, who has made her business all about making gorgeous clothes out of "rubbish".

It started with her refusal to throw away a sweater from her grandmother, which evolved into a business where she customised second-hand cashmere cardigans. But the ball really started rolling when famous Italian fabric manufacturer Miles gave her their damaged goods.

Then, Marc Jacobs, Sonia Rykiel, Valentino and Burberry started giving her discarded fabric. Castro has created new, unique-looking designs from these pieced-together fabric.

Other brands using recycled fabric are Lost Property of London and Emiliana. Meanwhile, Swiss brand Royal Flush creates gorgeous bags out of discarded leather. San Francisco-based brand Kyler Jewelry is using recycled gold, and silver to make bling blings.

Even high-street brands – the masters of "fast fashion" – are coming up with eco-friendly alternatives. Popular Swedish brand H&M launched its Conscious Collection in March. The clothes are made from eco-friendly fabrics such as organic cotton, Tencel and recycled textiles. Britain's Top Shop now stores products by People Tree, the British-Japanese brand that uses eco-friendly fabrics and production methods.

According to *Time* magazine, in 2007, Levi's discovered that manufacturing each pair of jeans uses 3,480 litres of water, which is equivalent to running a hose for 106 minutes. Levi's launched its Water<Less jeans in January, which uses 28% less water.

Meanwhile, Versace has joined Levi's, H&M, C&A, and Gucci in banning the harmful sandblasting process that is used to give jeans a "worn" look. The process involves workers firing sand under high pressure at jeans, exposing them to silica, which can cause silicosis, a potentially lethal pulmonary disease.

Workers in Turkey and Bangladesh have been killed as a result of this process.

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and match. There are lots of outfits where you can detach arms or skirts so that it's actually a lot of pieces in one," said Hawkins.

The Ultra 10 collection received a lot of press around the world, and it also won the Innovation in Design and Sourcing Award at Britain's Ethical Fashion Forum this year; they will receive the award in London in October.

Can fashion actually be sustainable when the industry operates on new trends, looks and styles?

"The current state of the fashion industry is not a sustainable one. It is largely about trends, looks and excessive consumption. But there are those who do take a sustainable mindset, using better materials and better applications. In time, resources and demands on operation methods will change the direction of the industry.

"We are at the beginning of a change, large markets are demanding more ethical products and even legendary designers are looking at using better materials. It's a matter of time and shifting perspectives.

"It's been really difficult for us," said Chanela about their efforts in



There is nothing dated in this outfit made from recycled fabrics by From Somewhere.

being a sustainable fashion brand. "Because in this region – people don't appreciate or understand yet. But they will."

Nukleus

This local brand produces underwear – briefs, boxers, T-shirts and



Aqua Green's Eco Swim features Repreve, a brand of upcycled fabrics of recycled nylon and polyester.

singlets – for men, though they plan to introduce the first ladies' series soon. Their products are sold in Parkson outlets in Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya and Penang; Robinsons at Mid Valley City and online at www.nukleusshop.com.

The undergarments are made from organic cotton (certified by

Global Organic Textile Standard) as well as Viscose and Modal (wood-cellulose fibres made by Austria's Lenzing Group, a world leader in fibre innovation and the winner of several environmental awards in Europe.)

Nukleus appeared in the market in the middle of 2010 but it took them years to get started. "The first thing we did was to study the attributes of successful apparel and non-apparel brands. And in our research we discovered something interesting: sustainability was the common denominator in those brands," said Nukleus manager for branding and market development Colin Tan via e-mail.

Eager to learn more about sustainability, the company consulted World Wide Fund for Nature Malaysia (WWF) three years ago. That "sparked a paradigm shift" and caused them to redo everything as they realised that they only had a superficial understanding of sustainability, thinking it was just about using the right fabrics and donating part of their profits to an NGO.

"We learned that sustainability

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Squash your carbon footprint



Go vegan – the consumption of meat and dairy products contribute to climate change and pollution.

By HEATHER MOORE

WORRIED that you have a sasquatch-sized carbon footprint? Eat less meat and cheese. That's the advice of the Environmental Working Group (EWG), which recently calculated the ecological impact of 20 conventionally grown foods.

The figures show that many animal-based foods have a super-sized carbon footprint – in addition to a whopping amount of fat and calories. In fact, according to the EWG, if every American stopped eating meat and cheese for one day a week, it would be the same as if we collectively drove 145 billion fewer kilometres a year.

Imagine what a difference we could make for animals, our own health and the health of the planet if we stopped eating meat and cheese entirely – or at least for a couple of days a week.

EWG's *Meat Eater's Guide To Climate Change And Health* found that in terms of carbon dioxide emissions, eating a pound (0.45kg) of lamb is equivalent to driving about 62.4km. Every pound of beef repre-



Switch over: People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta) members holding placards on the street in Johannesburg, South Africa, encouraging people to go vegan.

sents a 43.2km trip, and eating just a pound of cheese is akin to driving more than 20km – a worrisome thought, considering that the average American eats more than 14kg of cheese per year. Eating a McDonald's Double Quarter Pounder With Cheese means not only consuming 740 calories, 42g of fat and 155mg of cholesterol, but also contributing

to climate change and other serious environmental problems.

If you must eat meat, the report advises opting for grass-fed meat, lean cuts, meat without antibiotics or hormones, organic meat and certified humane meat. And, of course, don't waste it.

A 2010 United Nations report revealed that meat and dairy prod-

ucts require more resources and cause higher greenhouse gas emissions than do plant-based foods. Instead of choosing pork chops, hamburgers, cheese pizza and other fatty, cholesterol-laden foods that take a toll on your body and the planet, opt for wholesome, climate-friendly foods such as lentils (which were rated best on the EWG report),

beans, tofu, nuts and other plant-based protein sources.

Chris Weber, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania, has pointed out that not eating meat and dairy products one day a week has an even bigger impact on the environment than buying local foods every single day of the year.

Fortunately, many people are now opting for more plant-based foods in an effort to save the environment, animals and their own lives. Last month, Aspen, Colorado, became the first city in the United States to launch a comprehensive Meatless Monday campaign, with local restaurants, schools, hospitals, charities and businesses promoting plant-based meals on Mondays. Durham County, North Carolina, recently proclaimed Mondays as Meatless Mondays, as have officials in Washington, DC, and San Francisco. City schools in Baltimore as well as some public schools in New York observe Meatless Mondays, and Sodexo, a leading food-service provider, now offers a weekly plant-based entree option to the 900 hospitals and 2,000 corporate and government clients that it serves in North America.

It's a great start – but it falls far short. Would it really be so hard for everyone to leave meat and cheese off the menu for at least one day a week? If you need help, you can find plenty of delicious vegan recipes online. Once you see how easy it is to eat great-tasting vegan meals one day a week, you'll realise that you can save the planet, help animals and eat healthily all week long. – McClatchy-Tribune Information Services

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should be embedded in all that we do, that is, our entire value chain. Sustainability should begin with design.

Subsequently, it should pervade material selection, manufacturing, packaging, transportation, even product disposal. In other words, sustainability is an end-to-end concept, because every step along the way has environmental implications," he said.

For example, for their upcoming collection, The Quintet, Nukleus will be using Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified paper and vegetable ink for their packaging.

"The FSC promotes responsible forest management such as appropriate harvesting rates and techniques, and non-chemical methods of pest management," he explained.

Nukleus also encourages their customers to reuse or recycle the boxes.

However, just because something is sustainable doesn't automatically mean it is safe, said Tan.

"If you use the right material but the wrong manufacturing process, you can end up with a bad product. Hence, how a product is manufactured is important," he said.

The brand manufactures their products in China.

"The country has extensive experience and expertise in the manufacture of sustainable clothing. Another reason we chose China is

Make it your habit

to be physically close to the industrial clusters. If we manufacture in Malaysia, we'd have to import (the raw materials). Imagine all the transport-related emissions. That can't be environmentally friendly," said Tan.

Nukleus works only with Oeko-Tex Standard 100-certified suppliers. This standard prohibits or limits the use of a long list of chemicals that are detrimental to health and to the environment.

Nukleus also audits the "greenness" of the Chinese manufacturers' supply chain before working with them.

To reduce the environmental impact of transporting their goods from China, they use sea transport and not air as it generates less carbon on a per-cubic-metre basis.

Also, by treating China as their "one-stop logistics centre", they minimise the number of movements involved. "If a country needs our products, it can get them shipped directly from China. They do not have to move physically through Malaysia. Furthermore, we foresee that some of our key future markets are geographically closer to China than to Malaysia. Hence, having our logistics centre in China should help our carbon performance," he said.

"The bottom line is you can reduce your ecological footprint in every step of the value chain, not only in packaging. And the more you do to minimise your footprint, the more sustainable you are," he said.

Nukleus is also "contributing a reasonably large five-figure amount" within a two-year period to support WWF's conservation work. They plan to work with WWF branches around the world as they expand overseas.

Tan said that Nukleus products are within reach as they are priced between RM20 and RM30. Ultimately, the company hopes to "mainstream" sustainable clothing.

"We believe that everyone should be wearing sustainable clothing because it's the right thing to wear. This is not possible now mainly because the material costs are high. We are, however, hopeful. When demand picks up, the costs will come down.

"When that happens, we will pass the cost savings to our customers, allowing more people to enjoy sustainable clothing.

"We're not saying we're 100% sustainable, but we are going down the right path, and we are learning and implementing as we go along," he said.



Actress Zhang Ziyi wearing a sustainable silk cover-up by eco-designer Linda Loudermilk who also uses fabrics made of bamboo, sea cell (a mixture of seaweed and wood-cellulose fibres) and soy.