

Does Q=E?

Patagonia Catalog

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If we use a low impact dye that leaves a customer with a faded shirt nine months later, will that customer ever make an “environmentally friendly” purchase again?

Patagonia has an emerald green reputation. Is it deserved? The company has a strong history of employee activism, donates millions to grassroots environmental organizations, led the way in the use of recycled fibers in clothing and, most recently, rejected cotton grown with synthetic chemical pesticides. Yet we can't claim the label “environmentally friendly business.” If those who praise us assume that our production processes are always low-impact, that we always use the most environmentally sensitive materials available, that environmentalism reigns over other issues, they are wrong.

The fact remains: the clothing industry is dirty, and the production of our clothing takes a significant toll on the earth. No Patagonia products are genuinely sustainable. Producing synthetic fabrics, using industrial dyes, applying waterproof coatings, transporting raw materials and finished goods – these steps always involve an ecological price, always have an impact. There remains a direct connection between the manufacture of our clothing and the cascade of woes affecting the natural world.

We're not blind to that connection. We're aware of an immediate environmental crisis. But we also have a commitment to making the best quality products we possibly can. So we've deliberately chosen a dual focus: We will reduce our impact on the earth – but we will also continue making the best outdoor gear available. Sounds simple. But that challenge involves countless trade-offs that our customers should understand.

We've researched water-based coatings for our gear, rather than solvent-based coatings, and the concept is terrific: fewer volatile organic compounds are released and fewer toxins are used for the coating compounds. But these coatings are not yet durable enough to meet our rigorous performance standards. And so, while we keep researching water-based alternatives, we still use solvent-based coatings.

We're attempting to produce garments with every component made of the same fiber. A jacket made entirely of polyester, for example, would be much easier to recycle. But Delrin zippers and nylon snaps – which we now use – are much stronger than polyester ones. Switching to today's polyester parts could compromise the strength, making the garments less reliable for a Denali ascent or a trip down the Rogue. And so, while we keep working on it, many of our products are made of a combination of fibers and materials.

We've made significant and lasting advances by using recycled plastic soda bottles in our PCR Synchronilla fleece. But elsewhere in our line we still use virgin polyester. We're trying to make Capilene from PCR, but the yarn is not yet available in a size small enough to make the quality fabrics we expect. We're close, but holding to our performance standards means that, in the short-term, we continue to rely on polyester made from virgin crude.

We're trying to base our decisions on the notion that quality and environmental protection should be one and the same: $Q=E$. Patagonia's definition of quality must encompass quality of life on earth. And our environmental innovations must meet the Patagonia customer's demand for quality. If we miss the mark on quality, environmental innovations can lose their appeal in the marketplace. For example, if we use a low impact dye that leaves the customer with a faded shirt nine months later, we show that $Q \neq E$.

Our hope is that merging environmental standards and high quality standards will give our customers greater confidence when they bring environmental values to the marketplace. They will know that a "green" purchase can be a sound, practical investment.

We believe this dual focus has led to lasting changes. We've shown leadership with PCR Synchronilla; we stuck with our quality standards and have a product that cuts waste and substantially reduces our reliance on crude oil, a polluting, nonrenewable resource. We've made an even bigger steps with our switch to 100% organic cotton. The conventional cotton economy relies on intensive use of synthetic pesticides that destroy biodiversity and contaminate ground water. Organic cotton makes a superb quality product with a substantial reduction in impact. We've begun to avoid harmful dyes, while still holding to color and colorfast standards. And we've long believed that making a great quality product is, in itself, an environmental statement: If the product has a long and useful life, our desires to consume more, to extract more resources from the earth, are kept in check.

But what of the short-term, what of the trade-offs? How, you may ask, can a company that obviously cares about the health of our planet and its inhabitants really say that environmental improvements should be weighed on a scale with product quality? How can we reject a low-impact dye because it fails to meet our standards for color-fastness, and continue to use a higher-impact dye that ultimately damages rivers, streams or groundwater? Can we really say that fabric breathability is so important that we reject a process that might reduce our impact on the earth?

We'd like to hear from you on this. Have we overstated your expectations for quality? What do you think of our math? Please write to us at $Q=E$, Patagonia, P.O. Box 150, Ventura, CA 93002, or e-mail us at QEqualsE@patagonia.com