

# Reality Check

Patagonia Catalog  
Spring 1991

*“To live within limits, to want one thing, or a very few things, very much and love them dearly, cling to them, survey them from every angle, become one with them – that is what makes the poet, the artist, the human being.”*

*-- Johann Goethe*

Everything we make pollutes; the production of every piece of clothing we make has a negative impact on the environment. Period.

We envision ourselves wearing our gear while enjoying the benefits of nature or, better yet, while fighting environmental sinners. But it's a fact that our synthetic-fiber clothes start as petroleum, and the subsequent refining process pollutes.

Should we then look to natural fibers? Perhaps, but it's not that easy. Cotton has its problems. More pesticides and fertilizers are used for cotton than for any other crop; preparing cotton fields for mechanical picking requires powerful and harmful defoliants. Formaldehyde is often used in the spinning process, and chemical finishes are applied.

Wool garments – including some we make – often require dry cleaning. Sheep, the cute critters from which we shear our wool, are some of the most destructive grazers in the animal kingdom.

There are organic, sustainable methods of producing both cotton and wool. But production is still small, and there are long-range doubts that there is sufficient land to produce enough cotton, wool and food to support five or ten billion humans above the poverty level.

This is a depressing notion. What are we, as consumers, to do? We don't give up.

Although Patagonia has met legal and self-imposed environmental standards in the past, we've become increasingly aware of how much more needs to be done. As a company, we've started a comprehensive Environmental Review Process to examine all of the materials and methods used in making our products. On a relative scale, we're learning which of these is more or less damaging to the environment, and we'll continue to seek out those processes that lessen our impact. Our efforts involve every employee of the company.

As individuals, each of us has power as well. Unless we each begin to change our patterns of consumption, we can't expect the broader realities to change. Because the

production of virtually all consumer items in the industrial world results in pollution, the best way to reduce our impact is to demand less (to buy fewer items) and to demand better (to buy things that last).

Certainly our disposables must be recyclable and biodegradable. But in our choices of durable goods (including clothing) the most profound environmental statement we can make as consumers is to buy judiciously and to begin buying things that will last and last.

In some ways, Patagonia has been “environmental” by accident. Our historic focus on making long-lasting, high-quality products may, in fact, have been the most important step we could have taken.

As a society, the solutions we need will not be solely technological in nature. There will be no environmental superheroes to lead us out of the morass. Each of us has contributed to the problem. Each of us can help to solve it.