

# How Canopy Planet, a B.C. forest advocate, won over the fashion giants

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The fashion industry is a US\$1.5-trillion dollar powerhouse with an estimated market value of \$331-billion in the United States alone. So when you wake up one morning, pull on the gloves and declare to the behemoth: “It’s on!” you’re either slightly nuts or motivated by something deeper.

Nicole Rycroft, founder and executive director of Canopy Planet, a Vancouver-based social enterprise focused on safeguarding the world’s forests and climate, falls into the latter category. The non-profit initially made its mark with a campaign that persuaded 700 large printers and publishers including Transcontinental Inc., the New York Times and Random House to “green” their publishing practices.

While that campaign, which started in 2000, continues, Ms. Rycroft recently shifted focus to what we wear. “Clothing is quickly becoming a major threat to the world’s endangered forests,” she said. “Almost 100 million trees disappear into clothing every year and that’s projected to more than double within the next 15 to 20 years.”



The problem is dissolving pulp mills often source from ancient and endangered forests when manufacturing close to five million tonnes a year of man-made cellulosic fabrics

commonly found in our wardrobe: rayon, viscose, modal and lyocell. Dissolving-pulp production is projected to double by 2050, significantly affecting the habitat of various endangered species and the forests they inhabit. Canada's Boreal is slated for the largest ramp-up of dissolving pulp capacity and, according to a report released in September from Global Forest Watch, Canada accounts for the largest virgin forest degradation in the world.

"We saw this as an incredible opportunity to work with designers and clothing brands to alleviate this emerging pressure on forests and to focus on more ecologically sustainable solutions," Ms. Rycroft said.

But, as any entrepreneur knows, ambition is the easy part — it's putting plans into action that can lead to bruising.

Leveraging its earlier success, the team targeted international leaders in the industry and drafted a formal set of three-year commitments that all would sign and implement with Canopy's help: to eliminate the use of endangered forest fibres, to prioritize and help develop environmentally sustainable alternatives such as recycled fabrics, to support the development of fabric fibres made from straw rather than trees and to help advance conservation on the ground.

To date 13 major brands and 15 designers have committed to the CanopyStyle pledge. Representing US\$45-billion worth of sales each year, the signatories include the world's two largest retailers H&M and Zara, luxury designer Stella McCartney and retail heavyweights such as Eileen Fisher, Quicksilver, Lululemon and Patagonia.

Although far from her goal, Ms. Rycroft is inspired by the possibilities. "What's really exciting is that the Top 10 viscous suppliers supply 80% of viscous fibre globally. So by having the strong support of fashion brands and the critical mass to engage those viscous suppliers, we should see a dramatic shift," she said.

The step was a no-brainer for Henrik Lampa, Stockholm-based H&M's environmental sustainability manager. "We're doing a lot of different initiatives on sustainability," he said, referring to the company's forays into organic cotton and recycled material, among others. "And Canopy made a very elegant case on the rationale for doing this."

While still in the early stages of the Canopy pledge, H&M is fully committed to the extensive process. The family-owned business has always taken a forward-thinking view, one that looks both up- and downstream, at positive and negative impacts, Mr. Lampa said in a phone interview. "If it's a choice between short and long-term, they always go with long."

The same holds true for popular U.S. brand Eileen Fisher. It should be no surprise that the company is a signatory to Canopy's commitments: Its founder established a Social Consciousness department in 1997 that focused on human rights, the environment and women empowerment.

The call from Canopy was good timing, said Shona Quinn, Eileen Fisher's sustainability leader. The brand had recently begun mapping its supply chain and learning about viscose and rayon. "We've always been interested in where our materials come from, particularly raw materials," she said in a phone interview from New York.

To be sure, sustainability is a popular buzzword in today's apparel industry. Whether adopting energy efficient practices, organic cotton clothing or scrutinizing first-tier suppliers and working conditions in response to last year's devastating fire in a Bangladeshi factory, company initiatives are seen not only as ethically sound but also good business. To wit: Sales of ethical clothing increased 72% in the Britain, according to the Cooperative Bank Ethical Consumerism Report; while a 2013 study by the Business Development Bank of Canada found consumers are willing to spend more for ethically produced and eco-friendly products.

"There's a growing conversation about sustainability and consciousness," echoed New York-based sustainable fashion consultant Amy DuFault, who worked as a writer and buyer in the industry for more than 10 years. "Retailers are responding accordingly, providing mainstream consumers with what they want."

It's one thing to talk about responsible design and quite another to delve into one's supply chain down to its raw materials, a time-consuming and possibly costly process. But if you want to avoid greenwashing in favour of real change, it may be worth the effort, Ms. DuFault added.

"We have definitely taken the path less traveled, so to speak," Ms. Quinn acknowledged of the company's work with Canopy. "It's hard for some companies to get that far down the supply chain and understand how it works when it's such a distant place. But we weren't afraid of that."

Neither was Montreal-born designer, Tara St James, whose New York-based label, Study, uses only socially responsible materials. "There's lots of misinformation out there on sustainability, it's hard to tell what's accurate and what's not," she said. Speaking to Canopy and signing on to their pledge helped.

“One product used questionable material so I eliminated it,” she said, acknowledging that for bigger designers with larger supply chains, implementation may be more complex.

For H&M and Eileen Fisher, the focus is on building support and trust with their fibre producers. Along with Canopy, Stella McCartney and Zara, the two are part of a working group who meet regularly to discuss plans and how to get viscous suppliers to move to the next steps.

While there hasn't been any real pushback from them yet, Ms. Quinn admits there's probably some nervousness. “But they're taking steps and that's all we could ask for at this point,” she said.

“It's about collaborating and bringing that supply chain in as opposed to pointing fingers and saying, ‘Why didn't you do this,’” added Ms. Quinn, who credits Canopy with the less-threatening approach.

The organization is often commended for its conciliatory style, believing that working with the business community is way more effective than the alternative.

The approach helped set the collaborative tone among Canopy partners. As Ms. Quinn said, “There's nothing competitive about forest conservation, we all need that raw material if we want to make a rayon dress 10 years from now.”



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