



# Outdoor clothing – More than a green raincoat?

Those who want to buy sustainable outdoor clothes and do not trust everything that calls itself „green“ face a difficult choice. When buying outdoor jackets etc., functionality is the top priority, closely followed by design. Expectations regarding modern functional clothing are high: it should be lightweight, hardwearing, waterproof, windproof, breathable, and on top of that, fashionable. In a word: cool. But working conditions in the clothing industry are known to be anything but cool. Although designs are mostly drafted in industrialised countries, the clothes are produced in emerging and developing countries such as China, Vietnam and Bangladesh. Admittedly, this creates employment, predominantly for women, allowing them to live more independently. However, these women often work for many hours in undesirable conditions and receive only minimum wages, often not sufficient to survive, which results in the women having to work extra hours. Therefore, the social sustainability of outdoor clothing is at least questionable. Social sustainability is also what's at the heart of the efforts of the renowned initiative „Clean Clothes Campaign“.



The issue of economic sustainability is rather one of equitable distribution. Who makes how much money in the production of outdoor clothing, which is in high demand across the globe? Additionally, there is the complex issue of ecological sustainability, posing a lot of questions that are difficult to answer: are toxins generated in production? Are they released into the air, ground water or rivers? Or do they remain in the products and are released when wearing or, at the latest, when disposing of the stylish jacket? What about energy consumption and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions during production? Are there negative impacts on biodiversity? Is outdoor clothing (or bags) recyclable and is it recycled?

These are a lot of questions that Naturefriends International (NFI) will look into in this new dossier.

## 1. I want to buy environmentally friendly outdoor

### clothes. What do I have to watch out for?

Outdoor clothing needs to be as lightweight, weatherproof, waterproof and breathable as possible. These features are not easy to obtain using natural fibres – and very few people settle for old-school materials such as loden nowadays – so a lot of synthetic fibres are used. A great deal of research and development is going on in the field of production of outdoor clothing, also trying to make it more environmentally friendly. The substances that are NOT contained in a material or membrane are often a determining factor. For example, Sympatex makes do without Polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), which is suspected of being carcinogenic. It is important to look for the bluesign label which is considered the strictest label for environmental standards in textiles. The OEKO-TEX certificate is better-known as it is widespread and there are several different levels of this certificate. The GOTS certificate is also very well-known, but it is usually rather used for cotton products.



However, an environmentally friendly production also involves other factors, such as energy consumption, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and a possible negative impact on biodiversity. Although natural fibres are less important in production of outdoor clothing, it's very important for biodiversity whether organic cotton or „normal“ cotton is grown and used for clothes. „Normal“ cotton is produced with lots of pesticides that are known to be very harmful for many species. Therefore, it is advisable to buy organic cotton.

Recycling and recyclability of outdoor clothing and the whole issue of recycling and upcycling are becoming ever more important in the discussions about ecological, social and, thus, economic sustainability. Please see point 7 for more information on this issue.

## 2. What about the social conditions in production

of outdoor clothing? As customer, how can I

make sure that employees in production are

paid fair wages?

Nowadays, larger clothes companies have a rather complex supply chain, including suppliers that produce fibres and other raw materials as well as others that use all these materials to produce the end product - e.g. to sew the jacket.

It is not the exception of the rule that brand companies do not have detailed knowledge of all their suppliers, a fact that prevents them from exerting influence on them. Nevertheless, by awarding contracts (or not), large companies can generally influence the conditions under which their articles are produced.

The control organisation Fair Wear Foundation (FWF), a renowned NGO having its main office in the Netherlands, requires brand companies that wish to become member of Fair Wear to know at least 90 percent of the sewing factories they obtain their goods from. When a company meets this condi-

tion and wishes to cooperate with FWF, it can use the FWF label to make its commitment visible to the consumers. FWF is present in 15 production countries. Its employees are experts on local laws and conditions and both train employees of the brand companies concerned and carry out independent monitoring of the suppliers. There is a telephone hotline for the suppliers' employees to enable them to make anonymous complaints. The executives of the suppliers have to agree to those measures to keep producing for a brand company that is member of FWF.

However, what remains a problem is examining working conditions in the businesses that produce the raw materials, as these are often not taken into account given the complexity of the manufacturing chain.

## 3. Can I expect clothes with quality labels

to be „perfect“?

No. You have to know that there are various types of quality labels. Basically, there are labels for finished products and labels for processes. Both can be reliable.

Process-oriented labels give information on services within the supply chain – or about how interested the manufacturers or service providers at the end of the chain are to trigger improvements. In the context of clothing, however, such labels do not imply more than an effort of the brand company to improve working conditions in their suppliers' businesses around the globe. They do not imply that „perfection“ is already attained in all suppliers or products of this company, but that the company is aware of the problems in global production and that it endeavours to achieve improvement.

Good examples are bluesign or OEKOTEX for product-oriented labels and the Fair Wear Foundation (FWF) label for process-oriented labels. They are awarded by independent, reputable organisations after detailed assessments.



Only products that are free of toxic substances can be awarded the bluesign or Oeko-tex label. The Fair Wear Foundation (FWF) only accepts members that can prove to know at least 90% of their suppliers and that commit themselves to making improvements in those businesses, together with FWF. If they can't prove successful in this endeavour in a certain period, they lose the right to use the Fair Wear label.



#### 4. What are „good working conditions“?

There are different standards in different

countries ...

It's true that working conditions (e.g. the weekly working time) differ a lot from one country to the next, but there are worldwide minimum standards, laid down in the guidelines of the International Labour Organization (ILO). These minimum standards are based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and include the prohibition of child labour, the right to association and collective bargaining, the right to receive a wage to live on and feed one's family, the prohibition to reduce this wage for „disciplinary“ reasons and thus extort workers and – very importantly – the right to a safe, healthy and hygienic working environment. Although this might sound self-evident to Europeans: the ILO guidelines also make it clear that nobody may be forced to work and that compulsory labour and slavery are internationally prohibited.

As regards working time, the Fair Wear Foundation (FWF) considers 48 hours per week to be the limit of regular working time; voluntary overtime of not more than 12 hours is accepted additionally when paid. One day off per week is mandatory.

#### 5. Could it be a solution to only buy outdoor

clothing produced in Europe?

Manufacturing businesses operating legally in Europe comply with minimum standards on employees' safety, environmental safety and remuneration. Consumers that care about fair conditions in the production of the products they buy might therefore consider it to be the easiest solution to buy products from European manufacturing businesses. However, nowadays it is difficult to find clothes that were produced exclusively in Europe or the old industrialised countries. This is also valid for outdoor clothing. Over the last decades, production has been gradually relocated to Asia. According to Antje von Dewitz, chief executive officer of VAUDE, most machines, materials as well as production knowhow are located in Asia. In rare cases, sports undergarments are still produced in Europe. These can be found in specialist stores.

#### 6. Even outdoor clothes that have been produced

in environmentally friendly and socially

acceptable circumstances need to be cleaned

and cared. What's the best way to do this?

Outdoor clothes need to be cleaned, washed and dried regularly. Functional textiles should not be washed at more than 40 degrees. Pay attention to use environmentally friendly detergents. Forget about the tumble dryer – mechanical drying can damage delicate high-tech materials and the membrane coating of outdoor clothes – and use the good old clothes line. It is equally important to regularly waterproof your dry clothes in order to prevent unwanted absorption of water into the fabric and to make them more weatherproof. Outdoor clothes are often pre-treated with a waterproof coating when you buy them, but it will wear off with time and use and therefore needs to be renewed. However, most waterproofing products are not biodegradable and accumulate in the environment. Nikwax or Fibertec produce environmentally friendly waterproofing products.





## 7. How important is upcycling and recycling of outdoor clothes?

Also by Western standards, outdoor clothes are not cheap and we thus expect longer durability. But still: even the most resistant, long-lived outdoor clothes will, at some point, lose their functionality. What to do?

Do not forget that there is the possibility of repairing your clothes. In most cases, it will be difficult to properly do it by yourself, but several outdoor-clothes companies offer a repair service tailored to their products. Why not consider this option?



Should repairing be impossible, how to „properly“ dispose of your clothes?

Disposing of ever more waste costs ever more money - at individual level as well as at economic level. It's great if clothes are made from non-toxic materials that can be reused. On the other hand, outdoor clothes themselves are often made from recycled fabrics.

„Upcycling“ means that recycled materials are converted into products of better quality and thus save resources. If, for example, fleece jackets are produced from recycled PET bottles, no new plastic needs to be produced from fossil raw materials such as crude oil.



## A real-life example

### Interview with Antje von Dewitz, CEO of Vaude



*„If you want to buy sustainably produced outdoor clothes, you should look out for the bluesign label and search for a brand that is member of the Fair Wear Foundation (FWF). The bluesign label assures you that the product has been manufactured as environmentally friendly as possible; a Fair Wear Foundation membership guarantees that the manufacturing company champions good social standards in production. When buying Vaude products, you can look out for the Vaude-specific Green Shape label that we use to distinguish products that have been produced in an especially environmentally friendly and resource-efficient way.“*

Antje von Dewitz, CEO of Vaude

**Sustainability is an important concern of the German outdoor brand company Vaude. For outdoor clothing, what are the most important issues and crucial points regarding sustainable development? In production (social standards) as well as in environmental sustainability of the products? How can social standards be guaranteed in manufacturing businesses in Asia?**

**Antje von Dewitz (AvD):** „Vaude is a member of the Fair Wear Foundation, FWF. We constantly cooperate with this independent organisation to improve working conditions in the sewing factories that we work with. The image of „sweatshops“ is not accurate when it comes to outdoor clothes which are highly complex products requiring considerable know-how and training of the sewers. Vaude has employees in China and Vietnam that carry out unannounced controls of our suppliers. Then there is monitoring by FWF. Additionally, employees of our suppliers can anonymously call the Fair Wear Foundation to complain. FWF-employees on site have a great expertise on regional laws. An important principle of FWF is that we as purchasers and the management of the manufacturing business share responsibility for social standards. Together, and with help of FWF, we elaborate a work plan for necessary improvements. We want to optimise work processes, time frames and responsibility in order to avoid e.g. overtime. Our aim is to improve conditions on a long-term basis instead of changing suppliers as soon as something goes wrong. FWF reserves the right to expel members that do not adhere to the rules.“





**Many consumers think that the clothing industry in general is not transparent. They are wary of production conditions in Asia. Are they right to ask for outdoor clothes that were NOT produced in Asia? Do financial considerations allow a company to produce modern outdoor clothing in Europe, and in relevant quantities?**

**AvD:** "We always check whether it is possible to produce an item in Europe. We do produce a part of our bags here, but to produce clothes in Europe would mean an increase in costs of about 30 to 40 %. What is more, most necessary machines have been located in Asia for quite some time now, the majority of technical materials are produced there and also the know-how of textile production is deeply rooted in Asia nowadays."

**Does Vaude especially recommend a waterproofing product? If possible, an environmentally friendly one?**

**AvD:** "We recommend and market environmentally friendly waterproofing by Nikwax."

**What importance does Vaude attach to repairing?**

**AvD:** "We attach great value to repairing as we disapprove of the throw-away mentality that has unfortunately become prevalent nowadays. Vaude products are known to be resistant and long-lived. Still, if repair work is necessary, we have an in-house repair department with a team of 20."

#### More information:

[www.cleanclothes.org](http://www.cleanclothes.org)  
[www.cleanclothes.at](http://www.cleanclothes.at)  
[www.saubere-kleidung.de](http://www.saubere-kleidung.de)  
[www.bluesign.com](http://www.bluesign.com)  
[www.oeko-tex.com](http://www.oeko-tex.com)  
[www.fairwear.org](http://www.fairwear.org)  
<http://netzwerkfairemode.wordpress.com>  
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[www.konsument.at/cs/Satellite?pagename=Konsument/MagazinArtikel/Detail&cid=318881969302](http://www.konsument.at/cs/Satellite?pagename=Konsument/MagazinArtikel/Detail&cid=318881969302)  
[www.greenpeace.org/austria/de/themen/umweltgifte/was-wir-tun/detox](http://www.greenpeace.org/austria/de/themen/umweltgifte/was-wir-tun/detox)  
[www.vaude.com](http://www.vaude.com)  
[www.loeffler.at](http://www.loeffler.at)

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