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Have you cottoned on yet?

The truth about cotton

We can all now buy high fashion for low prices. But cheap clothing comes at a high price for the cotton farmers. **Kate Campbell** investigates

If you asked anyone to name an environmental and humanitarian disaster, chances are they would think of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear reactor fire in the former USSR in which 30 people were instantly killed and 135,000 people within a twenty mile radius had to be evacuated, permanently, due to high radiation levels. Closer to home, maybe the grounding of the crude oil tanker, the Sea Empress, in February 1996 resulting in approximately 72,000 tonnes of oil being discharged into the sea on the South-Wales coastline. No human fatalities but irreversible damage done to marine and wildlife in the area. Ask people however, about the environmental disaster they are walking around with on their backs and they would probably be shocked to discover that the clothes they wear are helping to sustain and feed an environmental and humanitarian nightmare on a world wide scale - one that affects mainly the developing world but that also poses serious health risks for people everywhere.

It isn't enough anymore to simply be choosing cool, crisp, 100 per cent cotton for our clothing. We need to be thinking about the circumstances under which the cotton is grown. Not only because of the ramifications for the growers, both financially and in health terms, but for ourselves and our loved ones. The human cost, let alone the cost to the environment, wildlife, livestock and the soil, is enormous.

The reality of our consumer culture is pretty sobering. Farming of cotton accounts for ten cent of the world's use of pesticides and 22.5 per cent of all insecticides that are used in agriculture. 23 billion pounds is spent in the UK alone on clothing, much of it cotton, and the cotton industry seems, on the whole, to be interested simply in the bottom line and not on the health and welfare of the people who grow the cotton and those who end up wearing it.

Africa and Asia are two of the biggest cotton exporters and while you might think that the high demand for cotton provides families in these two continents with guaranteed incomes and stability for their families, the reality is very different.

Your average farmer in Africa or India currently relies on toxic pesticides in order to be able to grow and sell their cotton on the open market. They have to pay for these pesticides themselves. There are no government subsidies and there is no protective clothing or training in how to use these highly dangerous substances safely. For every t-shirt that is sold in the UK for £20, the farmer who grew the cotton fibre for it will have received 15 pence. Nine pence of that is spent on pesticides leaving a grand total of six pence for the farmer. Any treatment needed for the after effects of the pesticides also comes out of this. The fact that American farmers are subsidised by their government to grow cotton keeps the market artificially depressed and any cotton grown in the developing world is >

Baby, Cut4Cloth and Cotton People are all becoming more recognisable household names - all of them producing high quality fair trade certified organic clothing made from fair trade cotton that is grown without the use of dangerous and toxic chemicals. Even the world of fashion has an organic champion in the shape of fashion designer Katharine Hamnett who uses organic cotton for her collections. All of these people have started to take responsibility for the effect that their demand for cotton has on other people. Controversially, Marks and Spencer, one of the big high street chains, has also made a commitment to using organic cotton in five per cent of its clothing. This is seen by some as a large chain simply recognising an emerging market and claiming

a stake, but it does show, none the less, that organic cotton is being taken seriously by the mainstream clothing industry.

You can make a difference

The biggest difficulty that faces the organic cotton industry now is undoubtedly that currently the market for organic cotton in Europe and America is limited. Consumers are the key - people need to realise that they can make a difference to their own lives and the lives of other people simply through the power of their purchases. "The most important thing that people can do is ask for it," says Katharine Hamnett on the future of the organic clothing industry. "Crucially the market needs to expand to make a difference to farmers on the ground."

So if you are concerned by what you have just read then the best thing you can do to help not only yourself and your family, but the families involved in the growing of cotton, is to buy organic cotton clothing. It will come with a guaranteed feel good factor. It will be better for your skin and your children's. It will be better for the health of the farmer who grew it and will have afforded them a fair price for their labours. It is official - organic cotton saves lives. □



ORGANIC CLOTHING FOR KIDS

Cool, ethical threads for children from some of the pioneering organic cotton clothing companies.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

People Tree collection including 'unexploited' tee; HUG wind farm tee; Summer range from Tattybumpkin; 'Give peas a chance' tee from HUG.

