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What Actually Happens to Your Donated Clothing?

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | December 12, 2023

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Americans buy 500% more clothing today than we did in the 1980s. So-called "fast fashion" has become so common, it's not unusual for people to throw away clothes worn only once or twice
- In 2013 alone, a staggering 12.8 million tons of textiles were sent to landfills — that's more than 7% of the total U.S. landfill waste
- As much as 90% of clothing donations to charitable organizations end up with textile recyclers. Part of the solution is buying less, and making healthier purchasing decisions

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Most Americans have closets overflowing with clothing — some of which may rarely if ever be worn. Inexpensive clothing — so-called "fast fashion" — has become so common, it's not unusual for people to throw away clothes worn only once or twice.

In fact, Americans buy 500% more clothing today than we did in the 1980s.[1] But the low price tag is deceptive. Upon further scrutiny, each item of clothing exacts a significant toll on the environment, and on human health across the globe.

Each year, Americans buy an astounding 22 billion items of clothing, and only 2% of these items are made in the U.S. Transportation alone, since each item has been shipped numerous times from country to country by the time it ends up in a retail store, creates an enormous amount of air pollution.

In an apparent reaction to decades of excess, recent years have seen a revival of "minimalism" and more environmentally-conscious fashion.

Bestselling books like Marie Kondo's "The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up" have led many to clear out their previously brimming closets. But what actually happens to all of the discarded clothing?

Most of Your Discarded Clothes End Up in Landfills

Most people will drop clothes off at a donation center such as Goodwill, thinking they will get re-sold to someone with limited means who really needs them. In reality, much of the discarded clothing ends up in landfills.

In 2013 alone, a staggering 12.8 million tons of textiles were sent to landfills — that's more than 7% of the total U.S. landfill waste — costing charitable organizations millions of dollars in various fees and transport expenses, to boot.[2]

But the vast majority are sold to textile recyclers and carpet manufacturers. According to a 2006 report by ABC News,[3] upward of 90% of clothing donations to charitable organizations end up with textile recyclers.

Only 10% are offered for sale to struggling Americans looking for a bargain. As noted by The Huffington Post:[4]

> *"Knowing how Goodwill works can help you make smarter decisions when deciding if another jeans purchase is really worth it for you, for the donations staff and for the environment."*

It's also worth noting that those used clothing donation bins you may find scattered throughout your neighborhood typically belong to for-profit textile recycling companies that sometimes falsely disguise themselves as charitable organizations.[5]

What Happens to Your Clothes Once You Drop Them Off With Goodwill?

According to Huffington Post associate lifestyle editor Suzy Strutner, Goodwill will sort through donations to determine what can be sold and what cannot. If it's in near-perfect condition, it will remain on the sales floor for four weeks. After that, the item gets sent to a "Buy the Pound" liquidation outlet.

Most other charitable organizations that deal in used clothing operate in in the same way.[6] Whatever isn't sold in these outlet stores gets sent on to Goodwill auctions, where you bid on entire bins without knowing precisely what you're getting. Whatever still remains at this point is sent to textile recycling organizations such as SMART, a trade association for textile recyclers.

Of the clothing SMART acquires, approximately 5% is discarded to landfill, 30% gets cut into rags for industrial use, 20% is processed for fiber fill that gets used in furniture and insulation, and 45% is resold into the American and international second-hand clothing markets. According to Strutner:

> *"This isn't necessarily a good thing. Obviously, re-selling clothes into the U.S. secondhand market just encourages them to make the cycle all over again. And sending clothes overseas can majorly hinder the textile industries in developing countries, robbing locals of jobs and income."*

African Textile Industries Suffer Due to Glut of Cheap Cast-Offs From the West

In March 2016, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda issued a joint proposal to ban all imports of used clothing by 2019 in order to boost local textile and clothing industries.[7]

Used clothes sell for less than 10% of the cost of a locally made garment, making the local garment industry incapable of competing. Already back in 2006, Bama Athreya,

deputy director of the International Labor Rights Fund in Washington DC, told ABC News:[8]

> *"Many of these countries in Africa used to have a fairly well-developed indigenous market for textiles and clothing and particularly for hand-crafted or hand-tailored clothes. And we've seen those markets virtually disappear …*
>
> *There is no question that the secondhand clothing market has had a significant impact on domestic African clothing production. The tailors, the small producers have been put out of business.*
>
> *Those were good jobs for Africans and there are no jobs taking their place. This is a trade that feeds on the poor rather than benefits the poor."*

In Uganda, more than 80% of all clothing purchased are second-hand discards from the West. The proposed ban has created a great deal of political push-back, however, especially from the U.S., so it's unlikely the ban will go through.

Still, it's yet another sign that our Western shopping habits have truly global effects — and not in a good way. Some believe the only way forward is for Westerners to become more conscious consumers. As noted by Kelsey Halling, director of impact for Thread International:[9]

> *"We need to find better uses for that 'going-out top' bought for $15 and worn only twice. Places such as Uganda, and Haiti, and India shouldn't have to be — and very soon may choose not to be — responsible for our excess."*

The True Cost of Disposable Fashion

Part of the answer is to give some serious thought to reducing your total consumption. A film that brings the problems of "fast fashion" to the fore is "The True Cost" (see trailer above), available for viewing on Netflix and Amazon Prime.

It explores the harsh realities of sweatshop workers who suffer to produce the goods we buy on the cheap and discard with nary a thought of what it took to make it, or what will happen to it once we discard it.

According to the film, fashion used to have two seasons — warm-weather dressing and cold. Then it became four — winter, spring, summer and fall. Now, there are 52 "fashion seasons" per year. That's right, the industry is now moving forward at the breakneck speed of new styles and trends being launched WEEKLY.

To stay on trend, you really got your work cut out for you! The question is, is it worth spending so much of your hard-earned money on things that will lose their fashion-forward appeal in a matter of days or weeks?

Overconsumption Is the Root of the Problem

Westerners have a tendency to think that we're being generous by donating so many cast-offs, allowing those with few means to get clothes they might not be able to afford otherwise. The reality is, the second-hand industry is struggling with such an overwhelming amount of clothes.

They cannot even house it all — which is why charities will only keep donated items in their thrift shops for a month before shipping them off for bulk liquidation. There's simply no shortage of second-hand clothing, so you're not really doing the world any favors by routinely adding to the donation piles. As noted in a Fashionista.com post:[10]

> *"… [T]ake [author of 'Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion' Elizabeth] Cline's advice: 'Buy way less and buy better, so that used clothes can continue on in the best possible condition.'*
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> *Cline, who recently returned from a trip to Kenya, where she was studying the impacts of the 30 million pounds of used clothing the U.S. routes to the country each year, argues that while charities' lack of transparency around the donation process is a real problem, 'overconsumption of throwaway clothing is the root problem.'"*

That's not to say you shouldn't donate your clothes when they no longer fit your body or lifestyle. Donating is still the right thing to do, since the alternative is to toss it in the garbage, which goes straight to a landfill.

But by buying less, you'd probably be able to afford better quality — items that were not produced by slave laborers in unsafe conditions using processes that damage the environment, that will last longer, and be able to be reused by someone else later on rather than be turned into rags or insulation.

Alternatives to Donation Bins

You may also want to reconsider where you haul your discarded clothes off to. If you have good-quality, gently-used clothing, consider donating them to places such as:[11]

Dress for Success and Career Gear (professional attire for the disadvantaged)
Cinderella Project and Fairy godmothers Inc. (prom dresses for those who cannot afford one)
Your local church charity that may distribute them to the needy within your community
Local women's shelters and crisis centers (call first to find out what kind of donations they accept)
The Big Brother/Big Sister Foundation
Brides Across America (provides free second-hand wedding gowns to military brides)

Toxic Garment Dyes Wreak Environmental Havoc

The garment industry as a whole takes a significant toll on the environment. Textile dyeing facilities, for example, tend to be located in developing countries where

regulations are lax and labor costs are low. Untreated or minimally treated wastewater is typically discharged into nearby rivers, from where it spreads into seas and oceans, traveling across the globe with the currents.

An estimated 40% of textile chemicals are discharged by China.[12] According to EcoWatch, Indonesia is also struggling with the chemical fallout of the garment industry. The Citarum River is now one of the most heavily polluted rivers in the world, thanks to the congregation of hundreds of textile factories along its shorelines.

Tests by Greenpeace reveal the river water contains alarming amounts of lead, **mercury**, arsenic, nonylphenol (an endocrine disrupting chemical) and many other toxic chemicals — all of which are dumped by textile manufacturers straight into the river without even the most basic of chemical filtration or treatments.

The final clothing items also contain nonylphenol, and it can take several washes before it's all washed out. This means the chemical is also entering your local sewer system. Nonylphenol is considered so hazardous that many European Union (EU) members have banned its use in the garment industry. It's not even allowed in imported textile goods. The U.S. has no such restrictions, however.

Becoming a More Conscious Consumer

Most cotton grown today is also genetically engineered (GE), which has its own set of problems, starting with the environmental destruction that goes along with the mounting use of pesticides needed for these crops. In Texas, winegrowers fear the approval of new herbicide-resistant cotton crops and more toxic herbicides may wipe out the industry.

Pesticides have a nasty habit of not staying put but, rather, drifting wherever the wind blows — and that's terrible news for vineyards that cannot tolerate the newer herbicide mixtures being used on GE crops. Paul Bonarrigo, who owns a vineyard in Hale County, has been unable to produce grapes for the past two years in a row. They keep dying from chemical damage. As reported by Texas Tribune:[13]

> *"Other Texas winegrowers have seen similar damage, and they blame it on dicamba and 2,4-D, two high-volatility herbicides commonly used on cereal crops, pastures and lawns. Now, the state's vintners are alarmed that use of the chemicals may soon expand to include 3.7 million acres of cotton fields in the High Plains, where cotton is being invaded by weeds immune to the Roundup pesticide long used."*

Besides reducing the amount of clothes you buy, seeking out clothing made from organic fabrics made according to sustainable practices also needs to become more the norm than the occasional exception. Such garments are more expensive (right now), but they also tend to last longer with proper care. There's definitely something to be said for the minimalist trend where you own fewer but higher quality items made in a sustainable way that you can wear for many years to come.

Opt for organic cotton, organic hemp and/or wool items, ideally colored with nontoxic, natural dyes when possible. While this will not solve all of the environmental problems related to the garment industry, it's a huge step in the right direction.

Businesses investing in organic farming and natural dyes include PACT (undergarments and loungewear), Boll and Branch (bed linens, blankets and towels), Jungmaven (organic hemp and cotton T-shirts), Industry of All Nations (clothing) and many others. As noted by The Washington Post:[14]

> *"Juan [Gerscovich, co-founder of Industry of All Nations] … stands over a 250-gallon vat of indigo, set in a hole dug in the ground … He acknowledges that the clothes produced this way aren't cheap — T-shirts from Industry of All Nations … start at $40.*
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> *But like other organic manufacturers, he says the high cost of this clothing ideally will translate into consumers giving serious consideration to the impact of their purchases. 'Shopping is thought of as fickle, something mindless, but in fact it is one of the most important activities an individual can do,' he says. 'Shopping is the equivalent of voting.'"*

Sources and References

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