

PROFILES



Changing How We Think About Clothing

by Sheri Radford / Apr 25, 2022

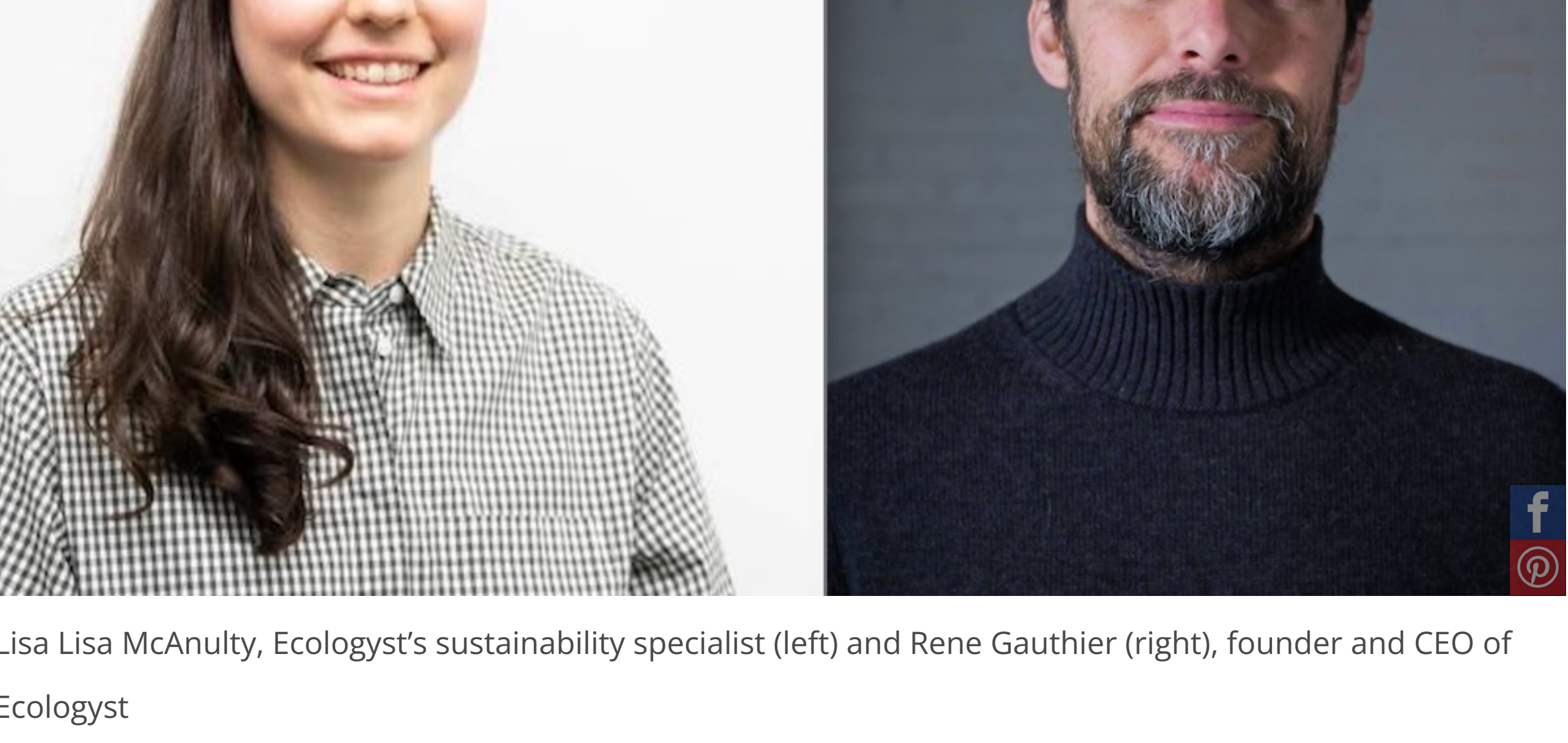
The people behind the Ecologyst clothing brand want you to buy fewer garments

Rene Gauthier has been known to wear the same clothing to work for weeks on end—without washing it.

“Honestly, it hasn’t been that long since humans have started with this mentality of, ‘I wear it and then it goes into the laundry and it must be washed before I wear it again.’ We’ve been conditioned by really savvy marketers that that is how we should operate. But that wasn’t always the case, and we’ve been wearing clothing for thousands of years,” says the founder and CEO of Ecologyst.

Polyester clothing must be washed frequently or else it gets smelly. That’s one of the many reasons Ecologyst eschews polyester in favour of wool and other natural fibres.

Gauthier says, “Wool is just a miracle fibre in terms of the antimicrobial properties of it. It doesn’t smell. If you do spill something on it, it generally stays on the surface, so it can be wiped off instead of having to be washed off. So a lot of these choices in the fabrics that we pick, they’re very intentional to allow people to wear that garment more than once before washing.”



Lisa McNulty, Ecologyst’s sustainability specialist (left) and Rene Gauthier (right), founder and CEO of Ecologyst

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Lisa McNulty, Ecologyst’s sustainability specialist, adds, “Every time you wash something, there’s microfibre shedding. It’s significantly accelerated in a dryer.”

The whole ethos of Ecologyst is about avoiding fast fashion and instead designing timeless shirts, tees, jackets, pants and hats, then constructing them to last. “The expectations of a product that we create is far greater than a fast fashion piece, which is eight to 10 wears then throw it away,” McNulty says.

“The design team is very committed to understanding how a product might interact with the entire ecosystem of Ecologyst products, not only colour but fit, style, all of the considerations that make something worth investing in over time. This wool shirt that Rene is wearing, you could wear that for 100 years. It’s not going to go out of style.”

The Ecologyst team believes so strongly in their clothing that they offer something virtually unheard of in the world of fashion: a lifetime guarantee. Damaged garments can be sent back for repair, and any clothing that can’t be fixed is replaced. “I think it’s important for all companies to be responsible for the goods that they’re making,” Gauthier says. “That is common in other industries.”

He mentions the burgeoning right-to-repair movement. “That doesn’t exist currently in the clothing industry. But I think that’s part of what we’re trying to shift here. We want people to start to think of clothing as a little bit more of an investment and not as disposable.”

Because Ecologyst pieces are so timeless and durable, they can easily live on in the secondhand market. The brand streamlines the whole process of reselling their pre-owned garments by running the Second Life program, which connects eager buyers and sellers.

It may sound counterintuitive for a clothing company to repair or resell garments instead of constantly pushing new items, but it’s better for the planet—and it’s even good for business. Gauthier says, “Yes, it’s an added expense for us, but we can see our customers really appreciate it, and so they come back to us.”

McAnulty describes what the company is trying to do as “really shifting that behaviour and that mindset into owning fewer, better-quality products.” She references Earth Overshoot Day: In 2021, people’s demands upon the Earth for the whole year exceeded the Earth’s ability to regenerate by July 29. McNulty points out that if everyone on the planet lived the way Canadians and Americans do, that date would actually be March 13. She says Ecologyst is trying hard to “educate and provide these really compelling stories for people to understand the true impact of their choices.”

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Part of understanding the actual cost of clothing is looking at how people, animals and the land are treated throughout the production process. McNulty explains that they use organic cotton, which has been certified to “ensure that there’s social well-being as well as environmental best practices being followed.” No harmful fertilizers are used. Plus, growing organic cotton requires about 50 percent less water than non-organic cotton.

Ecologyst also makes garments from wool. “I’m a vegan myself in my diet, but I wear wool,” Gauthier says.

“My personal perspective on it is that the relationship between these sheep and humans is a necessary one. You can’t allow that wool to continue to grow on the sheep. They will die, so they need to be shorn. Of course, we’ve bred them to that point. That is our fault that they can’t just be released into the wild. But that’s the situation we’re in, so do we just let all the sheep die? That seems even more cruel. Do we allow them to stop procreating? That seems a bit cruel as well.”

The wool that Ecologyst uses is ZQ-certified, from New Zealand. “I’d call that the gold standard at the moment, both in traceability and treatment of the animals,” Gauthier says.

“They also offer forward contracts for farmers,” McNulty adds, which help to reduce the farmers’ financial risk. In addition, she explains, ZQ ensures good land-management practices are used and the five freedoms for animals are followed.



The Ecologyst brand was born in 2019 as the natural evolution of Sitka, the clothing-and-surfboard brand Gauthier had launched 15 years earlier. Sitka had already been implementing more ethical and sustainable business practices for a while, Gauthier says, and lists a few: “Bringing our production back locally to North America, mostly in Canada, effectively trying to make our goods as close as possible to where people were buying them. Cutting out synthetic fibres from our clothing, so going to all-natural materials. And then also making sure the people building our products were treated fairly and paid properly.” Renaming the company Ecologyst completed the brand’s transformation.

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But that doesn’t mean the brand is done evolving. “It’s still a work in progress. We’ve got a laundry list of challenges we’re trying to solve here,” Gauthier says.

One recent change is the company’s new headquarters, which were unveiled last summer. Ecologyst’s manufacturing facility, distribution centre and shoppable showroom are now all grouped together in a gorgeous heritage building in downtown Victoria, Canada. Customers can browse for a shirt or pants and watch garments being sewn at the same time.

“Let’s see what happens when we allow our customers to come in here and see this with their own eyes,” Gauthier says, then laughs. “Their eyes really pop out of the sockets, because they’ve never seen clothing being made before.”

In addition to making timeless fashions, Ecologyst also makes documentary films that focus on issues such as the environment and social justice. The goal, Gauthier explains, is to create “some quality films, some quality content, that ideally can help in educating others and keeping this momentum that we feel is happening right now on the planet, moving forward and building and snowballing.”

When Gauthier looks to the future, he feels optimistic that there’s still time to fix climate change. “I’m a person that believes anything is possible,” he says. “I believe we’ve all got to do our part, come together here, to solve what is probably the biggest challenge humans have ever faced since our existence on this planet.”

And his motivation is straightforward: “We’ve only got one of these planets. That’s the most simple way I can say it.”

GREEN TIP

When your clothes do need a wash, be sure to select an eco-friendly laundry detergent to minimize your impact on the planet.

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