

LIFESTYLE



Is Fleece or Wool Better for the Planet?

by Sheri Radford / Jun 15, 2021

Colourful fleece vests may seem like the unofficial uniform of environmentalists, but which is ultimately the more eco-friendly and ethical choice, fleece or wool?

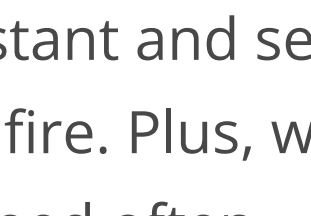

WOOL



Photo by Sam Carter on Unsplash

Humans have been wearing wool clothing for [thousands of years](#), and with good reason. It's versatile, durable and breathable, all year round.

Most people know that wool keeps you warm in cold weather, even when the wool gets wet. But not everyone realizes that lightweight wool can be equally good at regulating your temperature in hot weather. It's hygroscopic, which means it can easily absorb and retain moisture, so in the heat it quickly absorbs perspiration, leaving a layer of dry air right next to your skin. This makes wool a popular choice in many desert regions, with the hot days and cold nights.



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Wool is naturally elastic, easily bouncing back to its original shape after being stretched. It's naturally flame-resistant and self-extinguishing, so a wool blanket or garment can be used to put out a small fire. Plus, wool is naturally odour-resistant, which means it doesn't need to be washed often—a bonus on long camping trips far away from any laundry facilities. And it's fully biodegradable, breaking down quickly in the compost.

Despite all this, wool is not perfect.

It gets heavy when wet and dries slowly. It can be itchy. Good wool is expensive, putting high-quality garments out of reach for many, especially since they rarely show up in thrift stores. And even the priciest wool garment can be destroyed by moths.



Many wools are treated with chemical dyes or finishes that are toxic to people working on them or living close to textile factories. This type of work is usually done in developing countries that lack stringent regulations about health and safety. At the end of a wool garment's useful life, when it is placed in the compost, those toxic chemicals leach into the earth.

But the biggest concern about wool is the fact that it comes from animals.

We get wool mainly from sheep but also from goats, muskoxen, bison, alpacas, rabbits and other creatures. Wool has a smaller carbon footprint than most other fibres, but it is still responsible for some greenhouse gas emissions via these animals. Given how wool has exploded in popularity in recent years, there are concerns about animals being overcrowded on overgrazed land in places such as Mongolia, India and Tibet, where the native wildlife is rapidly being displaced.

When done correctly, shearing does not harm sheep. In fact, domestic sheep must be sheared regularly because they no longer have the ability to shed their own wool, as their wild ancestors did. Unsheared domestic sheep can develop medical problems when the wool impairs their movements and their vision. (One wily merino sheep in Australia managed to evade humans for several years and eventually needed to have a record-setting [89 pounds of wool](#) sheared off.)

Because of the rise of fast fashion and the ever-increasing demand for cheap wool, some companies emphasize speed and profits over all else, resulting in animal injuries, mutilations or even deaths. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) calls out [mulesing](#) in particular. In this painfully cruel practice, which still occurs in Australia, ranchers carve off strips of wool-bearing skin from around a sheep's buttocks in order to prevent flies from laying their eggs in folds of the sheep's skin.



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Companies such as [Smartwool](#) vehemently oppose such inhumane practices. They partner with various organizations to ensure that their wool is sourced ethically and sustainably, and they use recycled wool as much as possible.

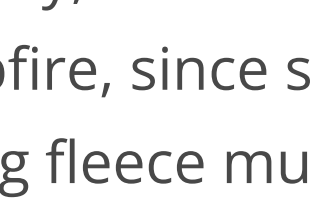

FLEECE



Photo by David Sedrakyan on Unsplash

Given all the ethical questions surrounding wool, and the fact that vegans won't wear it, synthetic fleece seemed almost too good to be true when it was first developed by Malden Mills (now Polartec), in 1979.

This cozy but breathable fabric is much softer and lighter than wool, it doesn't shrink in the dryer, and it doesn't come from animals. Fleece stays light even when wet, it dries quickly, and it is highly versatile and durable, making it useful in sportswear and outdoor clothing. It's also cheaper than wool, and fleece garments regularly pop up in thrift stores. *Time* magazine named Polartec one of the [One Hundred Great Things](#) of the 20th century.



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But fleece is far from perfect

It pills easily, which looks bad and also reduces the fabric's insulating properties. It generates static electricity, attracting hair, pet fur and lint. It's flammable, making it risky to wear close to a campfire, since sparks can create holes in the fleece. Plus, it develops odours quickly, meaning fleece must be washed more often than wool.

Fleece is made from polyethylene terephthalate (PET), which is created when two petroleum products (terephthalic acid and ethylene glycol) are combined at a high temperature. Petroleum is a non-renewable fossil fuel that contributes to climate change. Harsh chemicals are commonly used to treat fleece, to make it resistant to wind, water or fire. These chemicals pollute water and the air and are a hazard to factory workers. At the end of its useful life, a piece of fleece never biodegrades.

A further problem has received increased attention in recent years: [synthetic microfibres](#). Every time fleece is washed, it sheds tiny plastic fibres in the laundry. These microfibres end up in the ocean where they are consumed by fish and other aquatic life, becoming more and more toxic the higher they go up the food chain, eventually reaching humans.

Even though fleece is vegan, in the strictest sense of the word, it does still cause harm to wild animals.

Today, more and more clothing companies are using recycled fleece, usually made from old PET containers such as plastic water bottles. This prevents the PET containers from ending up in landfill and also uses less energy than creating virgin polyester. However, despite this progress, most fleece does still come from new polyester.



To address the problem of synthetic microfibres, companies such as [Patagonia](#) are doing everything from changing how they make their fabrics to studying which washing machines most contribute to the problem (answer: top-loading machines cause fleece to shed more microfibres than front-loading machines). New products are also being developed to deal with the issue, such as the [Guppyfriend](#) washing bag, which reduces and filters microfibres in the washing machine.

THE WINNER?

Clearly, fleece and wool both have their pluses and their minuses. As with so many issues in the environmental movement, there's no single, conclusive answer to this one. Much depends on the intended use of the garment and your own personal values.

No matter which you choose, here are a few tips on how to help the environment with regards to clothing:

1. Buy used.
2. If you must buy new, thoroughly research the brand first to ensure it is an ethical, fair-trade company that demonstrates a commitment to sustainability and is transparent about its business practices.
3. Purchase high-quality garments made from recycled fabrics.
4. Wash the garments as little as is practical.
5. Use the garments for as long as possible.
6. With some sewing skills and a little creativity, transform worn-out garments into new objects such as toys and doll clothes.



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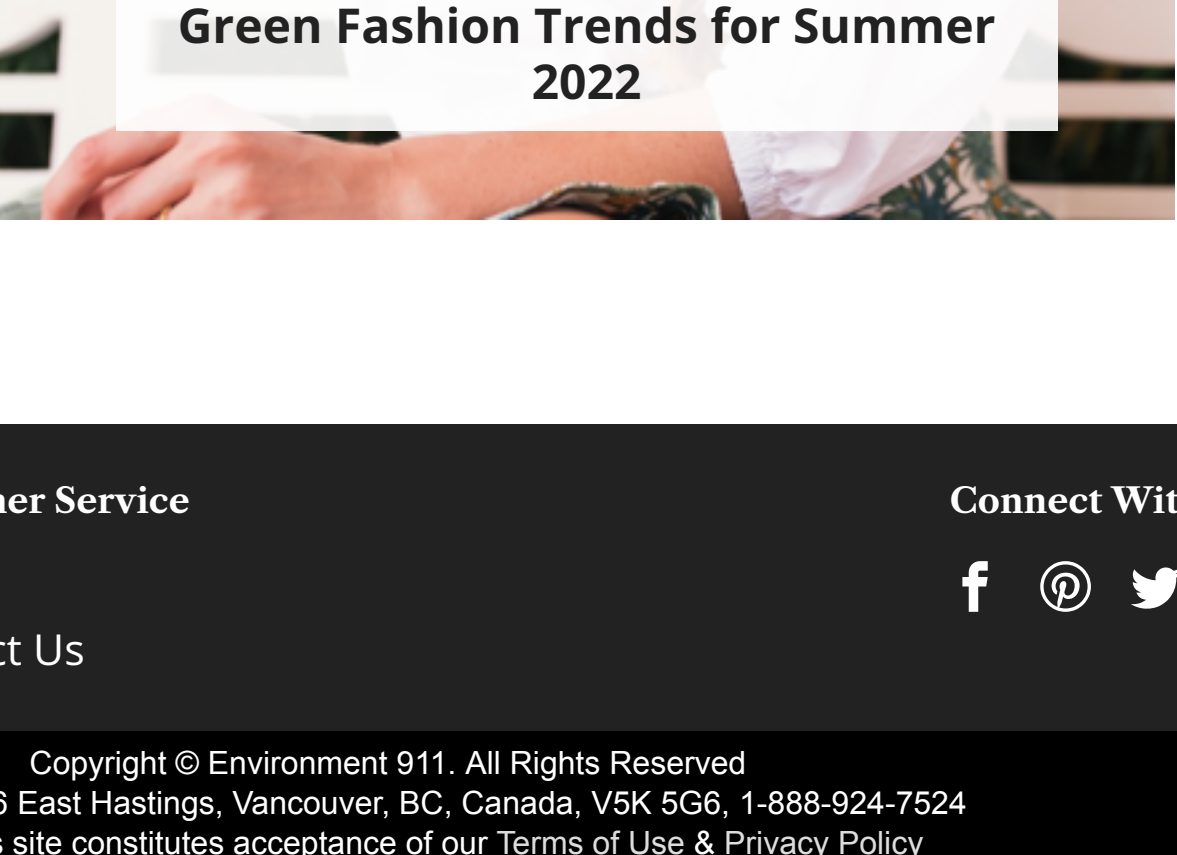
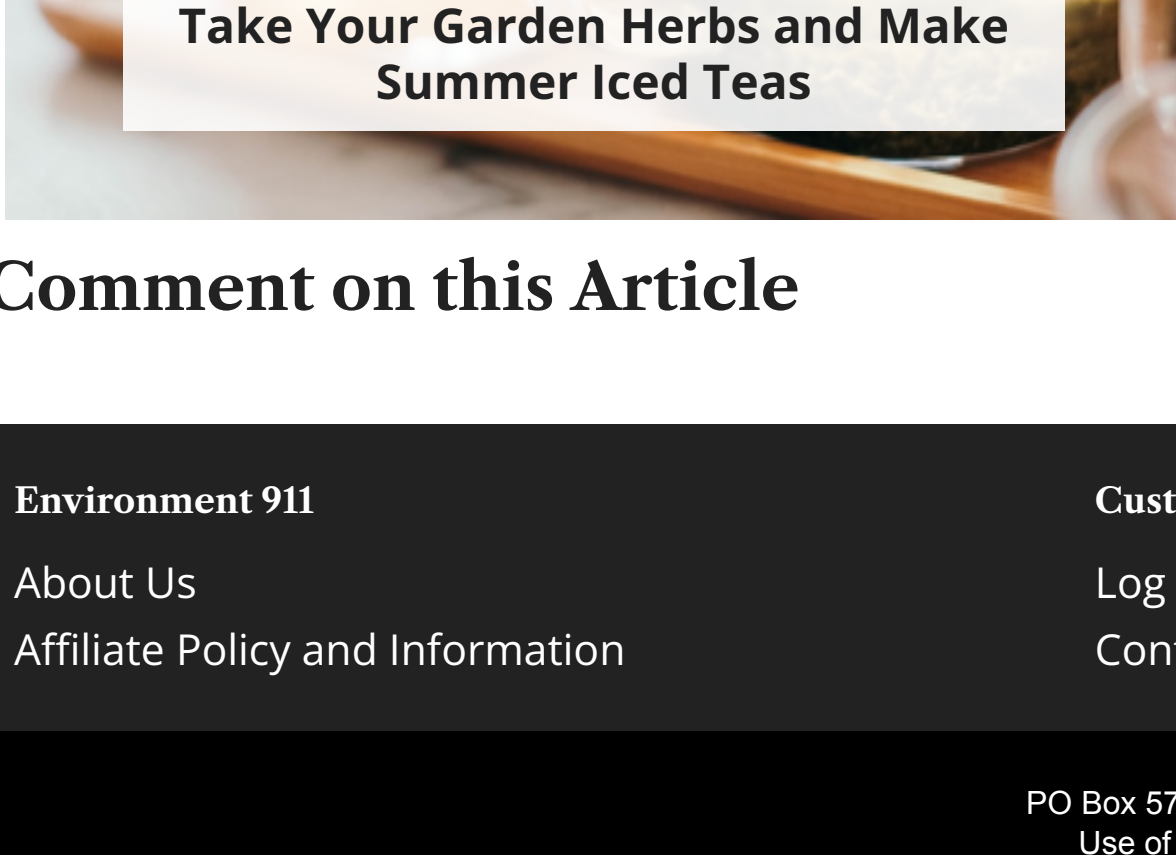




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