



# Reducing the carbon footprint of our clothing

By John Hall & Dave Green

In other articles, we have looked at what practical steps each one of us can take to reduce our carbon footprint. We know that the average carbon emissions in the UK are about 10 tonnes of carbon per year. If the UK is to play its part in keeping temperature rise to less than 1.5 degrees, then we need to eventually reduce carbon emissions to only 1 tonne per person. As an achievable goal for everyone, we should try to reduce our carbon footprint by at least 50% by 2030 (so at least 5 tonnes). The big areas we can make a real difference have been covered in previous articles (Food choices, Energy use and Transport) and could relatively easy get you close or beyond a 5 tonne reduction.

This week we look at our clothes and fashion that account for about 5% of UK carbon emissions; about 0.3 to 0.6 tonnes of carbon per person. Can we reduce that and still enjoy our clothes? An average resident buys about 30 items of clothing per year – some less and others many more. Some fast fashion is worn only once and discarded – on average people wear an item of clothing 7 times and then discard. So, buying fewer items and wearing them more times would be a good start. We have all got those clothes that we love wearing. The fast fashion item that you wear once and chuck has probably duped us all. Therefore, we all need to think before we buy: “will I really love wearing this?”.

Before we buy we need to think about the fabrics – man-made fabrics like polyester, acrylic and lycra are made from oil products whereas cotton, linen, viscose, and rayon are all plant based and wool, of course, is also a natural product. Cotton is good, but the other natural products are better because of the vast amount of water required to grow and process cotton. So, if you are buying something new then you need to check the labels carefully, not just for the fabric but also to see if there is any accreditation such as ‘Fair Trade’ or ‘Good for you’ or ‘Where does it come from’ which all have websites which give the background to their products. Think about where they are manufactured too – not so good buying a linen garment produced in a sweat shop in Thailand. Search the labels!

One way to slash the carbon footprint of your wardrobe is to buy second hand – many fashionable youngsters who are aware of the environmental crisis take great pride in buying second hand and vintage items – you will get some great deals compared with new fashion.

Eventually the time will come, after wearing many times and repairing your favourite jeans, that you really do have to discard. At that point then think before you chuck it – “can this item be recycled at the Clothes Bank or reused as rags or put to other good use?” A lot of us clear our conscience by donating unwanted clothes to charities thinking they will raise cash for a good cause. The sad fact is that over 80% of clothes that go to charity shops have to be rejected and go to landfill so no rubbish to the charity shop please!

The message is, if you want to help our civilisation limit global heating to below 2C (1.5C looks increasingly unachievable), buy fewer, choose greener fabrics, check the labels, look for items you will love to wear time and time again, hunt for nice second-hand, and when they are really worn out then recycle or repurpose the fabrics. With determination you will halve the carbon emissions from your wardrobe - about 0.3 tonnes.