

DON'T LOSE YOUR BOTTLE, RECYCLE AND WEAR IT

Few people have ever considered walking down the street wearing plastic water bottles or car tyres on their feet and even fewer would pick either as their first choice for comfort, protection or style. However, several footwear companies are recycling these and other unusual ingredients to make high quality shoes and sandals rather than creating items from new raw materials each time. "When a product is recycled, it means that fewer new resources have to be harvested to create it. It also means less mass going into dumps. Those are very good things," says Planetshoes.com spokesperson Sean Robbins.

According to the Materials Research Society, people in the US use 2.5 million plastic bottles per hour, while website Go Recycle claims that, on average, each UK household uses 373 plastic bottles per year. With a plastic bottle taking up to 400 years to decompose in a landfill site, it is easy to imagine the damage being caused to the environment. "Using recycled, natural, and sustainable materials in making footwear helps the environment by being more efficient with the resources we have," comments marketing manager at Simple Shoes, Greg Nielsen. Not only are these footwear companies encouraging people to cut down on the use of plastic water bottles, they are also looking at practical and creative ways of reusing waste items in order to help reduce landfill waste.

Oregon-based shoe manufacturer Rafter's Footwear is now using water bottles made from high-density polyethylene and polyethylene terephthalate (PET) to make the webbing for its sandal uppers through a process called polymerisation. This involves chopping the bottles into pieces, removing the water and melting the plastic so that it is chemically broken down. "When you extrude the product, it's almost pure polyethylene," explains Rafter's president, Bill Combs. Mr Combs had the idea of making the shoes after attending a materials trade show in Taiwan, where he and his team first encountered clothing made from PET. "The process is quick and simple so it works out perfect for footwear," he says. The recycled material can then be dyed and shaped as required, in this case to furnish some 15 or 16 sandal styles.

Rafter's does not purport to be a 'green' company as such, but believes in playing its part in preventing unnecessary waste. "We're not a green company because we don't get everything right," he says modestly; "we would never profess to. What makes us different is that we use fewer materials because of our minimalist designs." The company also recycles rubber trimmings produced during the manufacture of other outsoles as well as using recycled rubber from car tyres and other industrial items. This recycled rubber accounts for 25 to 30% of the outsole. Any more than this would compromise the quality of the shoe as, "unlike PET, rubber is like a cake; once it has been made you can't totally

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re-cook it," says Mr Combs. The remainder is made from pure rubber, and the company also uses sustainable products such as jute and cork for its soles.

There are some minor drawbacks, however. It costs around 40 to 60% more to produce the recycled PET webbing, while the outsoles cost approximately 40% more to make and are more difficult to manufacture. Despite this, according to Mr Combs, advance bookings since Rafter's announced the initiative in October have been "way better than expected". "We've been really surprised," he states enthusiastically. The company hopes that increased sales volume will help offset costs so that customers are not forced to pay through the nose for sustainable products. Mr Combs suggests that the 18 to 30 age group is probably most likely to buy the footwear, although he adds that demand to-date has actually been very "widespread" and "broad-based". He makes it clear that "the product has to be right" and this has always been the brand's number one priority.

Simple Shoes, a subsidiary of Deckers Outdoor Corporation, also uses PET for the shoelaces and footbeds of its EcoSNEAKS shoes. It uses 100% organic cotton for the collars and linings and also incorporates recycled car tyres for the outsoles—one car tyre makes six pairs of men's US size nine shoes, according to Mr Nielsen—and water-based glue to reduce the harmful environmental impact of the shoe making process. "By finding other uses for things that are otherwise trash, we give new life to perfectly good materials," explains Mr Nielsen. "Sometimes we also find some materials bring extra benefits with them. For example, we use bamboo as a lining in several of our styles. It is a really soft material and is a natural anti-microbial, so goodbye moist and smelly feet!" he adds.

Ranging from boots to sporty sneakers and sandals, the company puts caring for the planet on a par with profit making. "Since we are a smaller brand, we can commit most of our resources to this movement," Mr Nielsen says. "The good news is that, since we have made the commitment to make our products 100% sustainable, we have enjoyed an increase in business, distribution, and ➤

People in the US get through 2.5 million plastic bottles every hour—it's a potentially rich resource for making 'greener' footwear.

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website traffic." And, like Rafters, the shoes are not aimed at any particular age group, gender or social sector: "We do not target a specific demographic, but a psychographic. Simple Shoes is for those who want to live a laidback, ecologically responsible lifestyle without the hype," says Mr Nielsen. The brand also uses post-consumer and biodegradable packaging to further reduce its environmental footprint.

New Hampshire-based footwear company Miñ shares this desire to create shoes without causing avoidable damage to the eco-system. Its marketing materials use post-consumer recycled materials and earth-friendly soya inks. And, according to a spokesperson its injection-moulded manufacturing is "very resource efficient" with a rating of 98%, which means only about 2% of the raw materials ultimately becomes waste. This compares favourably with traditional techniques, which the company claims can create far more waste. Miñ also offsets 100% of the energy used in the production of its shoes, reducing emissions where possible and offsetting the remainder with clean, renewable solar or wind-turbine generated energy. However, the company adds that although it feels it is playing a part in protecting the environment, it still has "a long way to go".

Planetshoes.com, which sells Simple and Miñ shoes, as well as brands such as El Naturalista, Patagonia and Terrasoles, recognises some of the difficulties faced by companies making footwear from recycled goods. "The eco-friendly industry is still young, so finding those industrial materials is harder and can be more expensive," states Sean Robbins. "Also, some companies have to change the way they've been doing it for a long time, which means re-examining their systems. This is also expensive and time-consuming," he adds. Despite this, he recognises that demand for environmentally conscious products is increasing. He explains that several groups are contributing to this steady rise in popularity. "For most, finding that a shoe they like is also eco-friendly is an added bonus and motivation to buy," he explains. Although some of the clientele are initially drawn to the sustainable footwear for style reasons, environmentally friendly properties are often more of a help in clinching the deal.

Another company enjoying success in this field is Splaff Flopps, the humble beginnings for which were a tyre, a bike tube and a shoe knife housed in Cliff Drill's garage back in 1997. Inspired by a pair of "huaraches"—tyre-soled shoes from Mexico—Mr Drill's vision was to make a comfortable, long lasting and fairly-priced sandal exclusively from recycled materials. The soles are made from recycled car tyres, while the straps are made using bicycle inner tubes. Meanwhile, the footbed covering and strap linings are made with hemp fabric, and the mid-sole is made with Regupol—a cushioning material made from used tyres which have been chipped and pressed into mats. "We collect, separate, clean and cut all of the car tyres and bicycle inner tubes ourselves at our facility in San Diego; it's hard and dirty work," says Mr Drill. Its shoes are hand-crafted and produced in a 100% waste free, earth-friendly process and all leftover materials are either reused or recycled.

The flip-flops are designed for and tested by surfers, who require strength and comfort from the shoes that they wear day in, day out. "Recycled tyres create great soles for footwear that are incredibly durable and provide great traction," Mr Drill asserts. However, he warns consumers not to be taken in by the many companies claiming to offer 'green' products. "Please don't fall for the corporate knockoffs that are pretending to be environmentally friendly by putting a little bit of organic cotton in their products or by using partially recycled components. They are just trying to capitalise on a fad," he urges. By working hard to recycle, reduce waste, avoid unnecessary shipping and promote eco-friendly practices, these companies appear to be setting a positive example amid a 'get more, spend less' economy. However, despite encouraging signs, it remains to be seen whether bottles and tyres will appear on the feet of the masses in the near future. 🌱



Splaff Flops started life with an old tyre, a bicycle inner tube, a shoe knife and an inspiration. PHOTO: SPLAFF