

BUSINESS & MEDIA

Levi's green revolution

By Sandra DECKMYN

After our plates and our moisturising creams, the organic world has now expanded to our bums and legs. Levi's latest creation, Levi's Eco, is not a pair of green jeans but a green pair of jeans.

On 26 November, six months after Levi's came up with the idea, the first "organic jeans" were made available in select Levi's stores in Europe. The company claims that polluting the earth to produce jeans will soon be a thing of the past. Making denim jeans is an ecological disaster as cotton fields require huge amounts of pesticide and fertilizer, not to mention the pollution caused to rivers by the dye process.

Levi's Eco are entirely made of organic materials. The denim is made from 100% organic cotton; the jeans have coconut shell buttons on the waistband, non-galvanised metal fly buttons, and recycled zippers. The label is made from recycled cardboard, and the dye does not use any chemical since the indigo colour is produced from potato starch, mimosa flower and Marseille soap*, thus reviving medieval techniques.

Geert Peeters, vice president of product management, claims these jeans are as stylish as any others. When someone asked him "how do you know it's a Levi's Eco?" Peeters answered "The whole point is that you don't. It looks like our other jeans"*. The only detail showing it is a green pair of jeans is the embroidered lowercase "e" inside the front pocket or at the bottom of the right leg, depending on the range.

The jeans are produced in Europe. The factory is situated in Hungary where the machines were duly cleaned to comply with the rules of organic manufacturing. Materials come from Europe to reduce the costs of transport and fuel and are produced in neighbouring countries such as Turkey where the organic cotton comes from.

Even if everything is done to keep prices low, these jeans remain expensive: about £80 (120€). But Levi's is convinced that customers think high prices for high quality green jeans is normal. You Nguyen, the senior vice-president of Levi's product in Europe, said that "more and more consumers were making product choices based on the environmental and social impact" and that they were willing to pay more for green products.

But high prices may not last long, Nguyen explained. "In future, if this is successful we may look at ways of expanding it, but it will never be 100% of the Levi's product. This is because the availability of organic cotton is limited," even if, lately, the organic cotton industry has grown dramatically. Nguyen added that with their success they "may be able to persuade producers to grow more".*

Robert Hanson, Levi's brand president, declared that "as the inventor of jeans, it is critical for us to continue to innovate [...] in order to drive positive changes"**. By coincidence, Levi's revenues this year had fallen since last year**. Levi's Eco is seen as Levi's hope for a new start. 30,000 pairs of Levi's Eco were produced for the launch. However, the only consumers that are benefiting from the new jeans are Europeans, since according to Mr Nguyen, European consumers are more receptive to green products.

Sources: * "Levi's launches green jeans", *The Guardian* 24 November 2006.

** "New 'green' jeans to hit the shelves", *The Daily Mail* 11 October 2006.

"Levi's Brand Launches 100% Organic Cotton Jeans", *The Newswire of Corporate Social Responsibilities* 7 May 2006.

"Transformer le jean en produit écolo et équitable", *Novethic, le média en ligne du développement durable* 8 September 2006.

"Idea of green jeans taking roots", *The Times Online* 16 September 2006.