

Stacey Dooley Investigates: Are your clothes wrecking the planet?

'I feel like we understand what plastic does to the Earth but I had no idea what cotton was capable of'

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Like many of us, Stacey Dooley loves fashion.

"It's retail therapy," she says. "For me, shopping is a way to unwind. I buy a treat, and I get home, try it on and take loads of photos wearing it."

But in **today's world of fast fashion**, where shops no longer just produce seasonal collections but often drop new lines on the High Street on a weekly basis, shopping has the potential to become even more addictive. People often buy more clothes than they need, just to follow the latest trends - and Stacey, who loves to see what new clothes her favourite shops have available, is one of them.

"Fast fashion lures us into buying more clothes than we need," explains Lucy Seigle, a journalist specialising in environmental issues. "It's a production system that brings us clothes at intense volume." The more that shops produce copies of catwalk fashion at affordable prices, the more that people are tempted to keep updating their looks - and their wardrobes.



One major problem with this, however, is the damage it's doing **to the environment**, as Stacey investigates in her new documentary, **Fashion's Dirty Secrets**, which explores the shocking impact our insatiable appetite for cheap clothing is having around the globe. There have been

recent **claims that** the fashion industry is one of the top five most-polluting industries in the world, alongside the oil industry.

"I find that utterly staggering," says Stacey.

"Globally, we're producing over 100 billion new garments from new fibres every single year, and the planet cannot sustain that," explains Lucy.

Cotton, which is the most used fibre in **textiles produced in the EU** and totals **43% of all clothing** sold, might not sound like an extreme polluter in the way coal or oil is. However, **the production process** includes pesticides used in cotton farming, toxic dyes in manufacturing - and the huge amount of natural resources used, like water, is causing significant shortages. In an experiment in the documentary, Stacey is told that it can take over 15,000 litres of water to grow the cotton to make a pair of jeans. "I've never associated clothes production with pollution before," she says.

Travelling to Kazakhstan – a country that has been hugely affected by cotton production – Stacey discovers just how badly fashion can affect the environment. Back in the 1960s, the country was home to the Aral Sea. **Covering 68,000 sq km**, it was one of the biggest inland seas in the world and full of fish, wildlife, and a hotspot for tourists. But it has been shrinking since 1960 as a result of cotton production.

Stacey Dooley is driven across the seabed, now reduced almost entirely to dust.

The water has all but gone, and it looks like a desert, with one of the rivers that fed it – the Amu Darya – diverted into cotton-production farms and sucked dry before it could reach the sea.

"You don't understand the enormity of the situation until you're here," explains Stacey, standing on what was once the Aral seabed but is now dry land with roaming camels. "I feel like we understand what plastic does to the Earth, we're fed that every day, but did I know cotton was capable of this? Of course I didn't. I had no idea."

Another big issue to do with the cheap garment industry is the chemical waste discarded during manufacturing. **Indonesia** is an international hub for clothes production. On the banks of **the Citarum River**, there are **over 400 factories**, and activists say many are releasing toxic chemicals every day into waterways across the region.

Dr Sunardi, an environmental toxicologist, has tested the river water before and found toxic levels of mercury, cadmium, lead and arsenic in water that locals rely on for bathing and washing clothes.



River pollution in Indonesia

"To me, this feels like a complete catastrophe, and it's worth bearing in mind that Indonesia isn't even in the top five [of garment manufacturing countries] globally," says Stacey, when discussing the destructive impact that other leading clothing manufacturers could be having.

"It fills me with dread. It's hard to think that the clothes I'm wearing could do so much damage, but I now see how the industry is such a threat to the planet."

The BBC tried speaking to representatives from brands including Zara, Asos, M&S, Monsoon, Next and River Island, but they all declined to comment.

But some fashion brands *are* trying to solve this problem.

Paul Dillinger, head of global product innovation for the jeans brand Levi's, told Stacey, "We share information on how to reduce the water footprint of our cotton. We're working on a solution that takes old garments, chemically deconstructs them and turns them into a new fibre that feels and looks like cotton, but with zero water impact."

But large-scale change is still a long way off. "This is a big industry. It's so broadly decentralised that affecting change is nearly impossible," adds Dillinger. "Especially when the appetite doesn't want change [but] there needs to be a regulatory solution." In other words, more fashion brands need to start investing in eco-friendly production but the government needs to do their bit too.

Back in the UK, Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs told the BBC he was, "interested in any ideas to reduce the impact of waste on our oceans and wider environment".

He added, "We have already cut waste from plastic bags and microbeads. The amount of clothing thrown away is falling and we are funding research into new ways to deal with micro-plastics – but there is more to do"

Plastic has become a huge concern in recent years, but there are fears from campaigners and activists that other polluters like the fashion industry are being ignored. MPs **launched an inquiry** in June this year to investigate the impact of fast fashion, but it has yet to report its findings.



Niomi Smart hopes to persuade her followers to consume less fast fashion

One possible solution, according to fashion influencer Niomi Smart, is changing people's *attitudes* to avoid buying into fast fashion. She was surprised to find out just how bad the environmental effects of fashion are, after speaking to Stacey. Now she now hopes to persuade her followers to join her in consuming less fast fashion.

"Rather than going directly to retailers, I'd talk to my audience," she said. "As a consumer, let's change our attitudes. The beauty of what I do is I can take my audience on a journey [of eco-fashion discovery] with me. It's letting people know they can wear the same outfit more than once or swap clothes with friends. It's more: let's talk about this; what can we do to make more of an effort, and be more conscious about the environment?"

"For me to tell you that I'm never going to shop again would be completely dishonest," says Stacey. "But I do recognise how powerful I am as a consumer.

"The few pounds we spend for an item of clothing isn't the true cost - the real cost is the millions of gallons of clean water that was used to grow the fabric, or the millions of gallons of fresh water that was polluted with toxic chemicals to dye the clothes.

"It's a situation that needs addressing – and fast. There has to be a sense of urgency now because to be totally honest with you, we're running out of time."