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Photo: Masarà

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Swimsuits, sneakers, even credit cards: fashion is creating items from recycled plastics by pulling waste from the ocean or coastal areas and giving it a second life in the form of a raw material. However, these efforts aren't the sustainability win brands make them out to be.

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As fashion churns out more 'sustainable' goods, why is so much made from plastic?

BY RACHEL CERNANSKY



"A bathing suit [made] out of recycled plastic doesn't excite me. It's really not going to solve the plastics problem until we reduce the plastics we're making," says Jackie Savitz, chief policy officer at the nonprofit Oceana. "We can't really collect, process and use it fast enough. The real solution is to stop making so much plastic."

Yet, recycled plastics, not eliminating plastic, is where major brands seem to be putting most of their energy. Gap Inc. is increasing its use of recycled polyester — which in today's world is **made from plastic**, not existing polyester — and addressing **"unnecessary and problematic plastics"** in its operations. Sportswear giants including Adidas rely on recycled plastic as a key part of their sustainable materials portfolios. And luxury brands such as Prada and a host of swimwear brands use Econyl, a nylon made from discarded fishing nets.

"I see plastic pretty much every time I go in it, sometimes in overwhelming abundance," says Michelle Morgan, who founded swimwear label Seamorgens with her sister Angela. Photo: Seamorgens

In honour of World Oceans Day last week, these brands and others promoted products made from plastic waste and engaged in campaigns focused on ocean health — Adidas, for example, hosted beach clean-ups; Prada supported the digitisation of the Milazzo Sea Museum; and Gap launched a line of credit cards made with a recycled plastic core.

Facing growing public pressure to improve their environmental footprint, brands have turned to recycled plastic or ocean waste — in the form of recycled polyester or through branded materials or partnerships such as Econyl and Parley for the Oceans — to meet their "sustainable materials" goals and reduce waste and carbon footprints. Experts are unequivocal: recycled plastic is better than virgin plastic and any effort that reduces or removes plastics from the oceans is almost inevitably a positive move.

The catch is that, too often, recycling is tacked onto companies' existing operations — carried out alongside an increase in total plastic consumption, rather than as part of a wholesale shift away from it. That's where the potential for recycled plastic to deliver any real environmental benefit falls short, says Savitz.

Swimwear label Masarà's goal: no plastic. Photo: Masarà

"We like to use the bathtub analogy: when your bathtub is overflowing, you don't just run for the mop. You first turn off the faucet," she says. "If the industry can use less plastic fibre in its products, that's really the best thing they can do."

If that starts to happen, it would mark a turning point and she could see a role for recycled plastic in solving the plastic pollution problem plaguing the world's waterways — but only then. "If the commitment being made is to reduce the total amount of plastics used, and then also to use a fraction of recycled plastic, then maybe that sounds like a good thing. Once you have turned off the faucet, there's nothing wrong with getting the mop."

Recycled plastics at the forefront

While the number of brands using recycled plastic is surging, their efforts to eliminate plastic overall are less robust.

Speedo, which recently launched what it calls its "most sustainable" swimwear collection featuring a fabric made from plastic bottles and ocean waste, says it's committed to reducing the impacts of its products throughout their lifecycle by using recycled bags for shipping and fully recyclable packaging, for example. Employee sustainability squads also host beach cleans.

"Recycling in general is good, but it's wrong to give people the impression that recycling is enough."

Adidas, which makes products from swimsuits to sneakers out of recycled plastic, has **"a three-loop strategy" targeting plastic waste**, including making products from recycled materials, natural or renewable materials and that are able to be remade.

"Using recycled plastic waste is just one important part of our overall sustainability strategy," says a spokesperson. Through a partnership with Parley, for example, the company intercepts plastic "from beaches and coastal communities before it reaches our oceans" and transforms it into sportswear, and operates an annual event, Run for the Oceans, aimed at educating global communities and cleaning plastic waste from beaches and coastal communities.

Prada issued a statement saying its clothing and leather goods divisions started a programme to convert virgin plastic to recycled or "regenerated" plastic in some packaging components, and that in 2021, plastic with **recycled content reached 61 per cent** out of a total of 500 tons, up from 49 per cent in 2020. Gap, which also uses recycled plastic in swimwear and other products, did not respond to requests for comment.

Photo: Oceana

A number of smaller brands appear to be more thorough in how they're tackling plastic throughout their operations, and could provide a blueprint for bigger companies looking to reduce their reliance on plastic. Swimwear label Seamorgens does not use any plastic at all, says owner and co-founder Michelle Morgan, other than the plastic waste that's turned into the fabric. "The sustainable fabric for us is such a small part of our brand. We don't use plastic at all. My manufacturer packs it completely plastic free and this is how I forward it onto my customers," she says. "I would agree with what the ocean conservationists have said. You cannot call yourself a sustainable company just because you simply use recycled plastic in your product. The whole business has to follow that ethos."

Another label, Masarà, prioritises recycled paper and minimised resources overall, says founder Francesca Fabris. "This also extends to in-house activities and not just direct to consumers. The goal is to have no plastic around, and nowadays, in many cases, we have alternatives that do the same job as ordinary plastic. These materials are more expensive; however, they are a better alternative for the environment. It's just a matter of keeping that in mind when sourcing materials."

Photo: Seamorgens

For ocean experts, the bottom line comes down to whether or not brands are eliminating their overall use of plastic — and how they communicate their use of recycled plastic, and its sustainability benefits, to consumers. The more they market it as a way to save the oceans, the more scientists are sceptical.

"Recycling in general is good, but it's wrong to give people the impression that recycling is enough. A lot of times, I think that's what companies do," says Maddalena Bearzi, president and co-founder of the Ocean Conservation Society. "The message they should publicise is: reduce your consumption, or don't use plastic in the first place. When they throw those clothes away that are made with recycled plastic, they still end up in the ocean."

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