



The Buyer's View



Buyer's View: Patagonia



Environmentally-friendly leather takes a step into the outdoors

"Before sourcing any leather, we did our homework. What we found was that all leather does not have the same impact on the environment. To ensure that the leather in our footwear leaves the smallest possible footprint, we use tanneries with an ISO 14001 registration. We think companies that measure up to ISO 14001 produce leather that's better for the planet." Patagonia

It is hard to imagine a more powerful tool to boost the value of the ISO 14001 standard than a world leading brand, renowned for its sensitive approach to the planet, announcing a new range of shoes "built on leathers made only in ISO 14001 approved tanneries". That was exactly what Patagonia did at the recent Outdoor show at Friedrichshafen, in Germany.

The environment is a hot issue in all industries and big brands now sell their products on how environmentally-friendly they are as well as their quality. For US-based outdoor brand Patagonia, its definition of quality includes a mandate for building products and working with processes that cause the least harm to the environment. The company has built its whole branding around this concept and it has proved a great success with consumers in the outdoor market—after all, the outdoor environment is their playground.

As a result of its stringent ethos of environmental protection, licensing product is not something that comes easily to Patagonia. But, following continued requests from its customers, and through a deal with Wolverine's Outdoor Group which includes Merrell, the brand has launched a new 31-

style range of footwear that is in keeping with its ecological policies. "We have had increasing requests to completely outfit our customers from head to foot—the launch of our footwear collection allows us to do just this," says Casey Sheahan, Patagonia's president and CEO. "We chose to collaborate with Wolverine and, specifically, the Merrell Outdoor group, because of its superior design capabilities. We're working together to find materials and construction methods that can greatly reduce footwear manufacturing pollution."

Fresh thinking

This led to a range of new approaches and materials including latex from the milk of Havea trees, sustainably grown and which actually benefit from the milking; hemp uppers in some styles; vegetable based laces for some styles; a new Ecotep outsole, formulated by Vibram which uses up to 30% scrap rubber and, of course, environmentally-friendly leather.

The experienced tanner would automatically assume that this would include the use of "chrome-free" or "organic" leathers, which are supposedly environmentally-friendly as leathers go,

but this is not the case. According to New Zealander Craig Throne, who is general manager of Patagonia Footwear, although these options were discussed in the early stages of the development process, they were soon dismissed by founder and owner of Patagonia, Yvon Chouinard. He wanted to create shoes that were durable and suited their purpose whilst still considering sustainability and the environment. ISO 14001 entered the picture and the idea of working with tanneries that subscribed to this certification was hatched as a means of incorporating quality leathers that complied with its strict stipulations.

ISO 14001 is a tough environmental management instrument that helps enterprises to identify relevant environmental issues, facilitates complying with legal requirements, identifies possibilities to improve environmental performance beyond the basic requirements while reducing costs, and generally improves the company's awareness of its impact on the planet. This all fitted well with Patagonia's approach to production, but finding suppliers was easier said than done. Speaking to *World Leather* Craig Throne indicated that, at the beginning of the process, they could ►



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A pleasant environment

Patagonia is known around the globe for its commitment to product quality and environmental activism and although this is based on a fundamental belief in protecting the planet, it is also an extremely successful company, posting sales of \$240 million last year.

Founded in 1973 by Yvon Chouinard, it has built a reputation for producing clothes designed for the outdoor enthusiasts who take their sport to the extreme, whilst respecting the planet.

Over the years it has introduced more and more programmes and products aimed at protecting the environment from the negative effects of harmful processes and encouraging other companies to follow suit.

In 1993, it adopted fleece into its product line made from post-consumer recycled plastic soda bottles—the first outdoor clothing manufacturer to do so—and it now uses this PCR fleece in about

31 of its products, using some 86 million plastic bottles that would have otherwise ended up in a



landfill site. It has also now introduced a PCR filament yarn which also uses post-consumer feedstock such as soda bottles, polyester uniforms, tents and garments. And although it still hasn't achieved a fully recyclable garment, it is edging ever closer to this ultimate goal.

Patagonia also runs an Environmental Grants Program, which has already contributed over \$25 million to grassroots environmental activists since it was started in 1985. It also offers an Environmental Internship Program which allows employees to work for environmental groups while remaining on their full salary. It also founded 'One Percent for the Planet', an alliance of companies that donate 1% of their sales to environmental organisations world-wide. This group now has 374 members and is active in the United States, Canada, Europe and Japan.

Patagonia takes the environment very seriously and even its corporate buildings are designed to cause as little harm as possible. Its Reno Service Centre in Nevada, USA, which was built in 1996, contains recycled materials in its steel frame, insulation and window glass. It also has energy efficient lighting systems which rely on motion sensors to help conserve electricity and, in winter, a radiant heating system uses copper tubing and hot water to save natural gas. All of the wood in the building is either reclaimed or sustainably harvested; even the carpet is 100% recycled polyester and the wallboard, paint, floor coverings and ceiling and shower tiles all have recycled content.



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only find four tanneries world-wide that were ISO 14001 approved. However, this number has now grown to about ten, including well-known names such as Prime Asia and Pittards. As a result, between 90% and 95% of all the leather used in Patagonia's footwear range is sourced from ISO 14001 approved tanneries.

Furthermore, as far as quality and design are concerned, there is no question of the pedigree of the leathers used. Nearly all are soft and natural, and most are chrome-tanned. The majority are in brown shades but the range does include silvers, blues and greens in lighter weights. Despite the fact that the number of approved tanneries is limited, the ISO 14001 approach still gives the designers a wide range of leathers with which to work.

One step at a time

This is a good start, but as far as Patagonia is concerned there is still more to be done. The company will only ship finished leather to Asia (the shoes are made in Merrell suppliers in China) if there is no other solution, and it is starting to look at

elements in the leather such as the amount of finish. But there is still some way to go. Throne makes the point that "this is only a first step" and points out that the new range is actually called "one small step" for this very reason. The philosophy is to make the best product and at the same time inspire businesses to understand the environment and do something positive to protect it. "We are not shouting that we are the best. The environment is about education, the more you know the more you can do, and we are learning."

In an attempt to encourage ecological sensitivity, Patagonia works directly with the tanneries in developing the leather. This is something Merrell would normally do when designing a new product, but it also permits a continuing dialogue about the environmental implications of each leather chosen and the processes used. At the launch of the range in Germany, those present were given a complex chart of the tanning processes involved in the leather for the footwear and highlighted points (and there were quite a few) where environmental concerns had been raised.

Belief in fundamental change

While many brands use the environmentally-friendly aspects of their products almost as marketing gimmicks, it is a fundamental issue to Patagonia. Through launching ranges such as this, it wants to be a catalyst for change, encouraging more tanneries to sign up for ISO 14001 and more brands to stipulate environmentally sensitive production. It argues that this strict set of environmental standards measures how efficiently a company uses natural resources, how its processes impact on the environment, and how closely it adheres to international environmental regulations. Whilst the tanneries with ISO 14001 certification have publicised the fact that they have achieved the standard, there has been little success in turning this into a marketing concept.

Perhaps it would be good for the leather industry to support the Patagonia ambition and gear up for more and more shops with leather products carrying hang tags which state "leather supplied by ISO 14001 tanneries".

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