Eco Warriors

ELEPHANT CRISIS FUND AMBASSADOR DOUTZEN KROES
COVER ART BY JOHN PAUL FAUVES
Eileen Fisher has commitment issues. She is determined to set a new high standard and make her business fully sustainable.

*By Anne Slowey*
Eileen Fisher is having commitment issues. Three years ago, in 2015, just after her eponymous fashion brand celebrated its 30th anniversary, the 67-year-old designer announced that her company would become 100 percent sustainable by 2020. “I had no idea what it meant and really wasn’t sure how far along we’d get in just five years,” says Fisher of the initiative she named Vision 2020. “All I knew is that I would do whatever it takes to figure out how to make it happen.”

Just having rounded the midway mark toward that goal, the company, which generates between $400 million and $500 million in sales, is now 68 percent eco-preferred and is on track to hit 100 percent by the 2020 deadline. “Eco-preferred” is one of the terms Fisher and her team use to describe available solutions that would actually allow a company the size of Fisher’s to be 100 percent sustainable, a conversation that is still just becoming part of mainstream thinking among U.S. consumers. Right now, only 1 percent of all materials used in the U.S. are recycled, and the rest of what we buy, make, and use follows a linear, versus a circular, model where 98 million tons of nonrenewable resources are disposed of annually and 87 percent of all manufactured fiber is sent to a landfill.

Fisher got her start in fashion accidentally. “I’m practical and like to solve my own problems,” she says. She studied interior design and graphic design, but loved fabrics and textiles, and had a deep, emotional connection to how what she wore telegraphed something about herself that was, well, important. “I wasn’t a fashion designer, but I always believed that the feeling of clothes mattered,” she says. Inspired by the kimono, she and a friend starting exploring simple shapes that eventually led to the idea of layering that has become such a staple of most women’s styling choices. “I loved timeless design—not trendy or throwaway items. Also, I hated shopping.”

Thanks to the widespread use of polyester and rayon in fashion in the 1980s, Fisher’s fluid designs had a lightness to them that resonated with women of all ages, especially those looking for an antidote to the loud, brash aesthetic of the “me decade,” the attention-seeking ’80s.
The idea of wearing monochromatic somber tones, especially all black, was unprecedented in the U.S. at the time. But Fisher’s modern sensibility—with a whiff of a spiritual vibe, no less—was a no-brainer for most women. Fisher became the go-to fashion guru for everyone from intellectuals and housewives to artists and professionals. “I just wanted to make clothes that were simple and eliminated the stress and anxiety of getting dressed,” she says.

Not surprisingly, Fisher has always been socially conscious. “It’s embedded in the way we do things here,” she says of the outreach programs she hosts at her stores and upcycling centers in Seattle and at the Tiny Factory, her 20,000-square-foot recycling center in Irvington, New York. “We’re constantly thinking about what we’re saying to women. We host yoga and meditation workshops, and through our Makers and
Lifework projects we are creating a community of customers who join that conversation.”

It was not long after the human rights scandals for garment workers in Asia came to light in the mid-1990s that Fisher began thinking about sustainability and how fashion is the number-two polluter, second only to the automotive industry. It would be another decade before the fashion industry itself began to look for a best-practices solution to create circularity and eliminate waste. “I’d be sitting in my purpose chair,” she says, of a stool that she sits on in her kitchen at the start of each day. “I kept getting these messages. It set me on the path of simply asking the question: Can we at least commit to being 100 percent sustainable?” Shortly thereafter, while she was at a SEED Systems retreat with Sara Schley at the Won Dharma Meditation and Retreat Center in Claverack, New York, her thoughts about sustainability just wouldn’t be silenced. “There was a moment where I realized that I needed to figure out what to say yes and no to. It was my name on the door. I knew I should say yes.”

As fate would have it, Fisher’s first step to sustainability would mean dropping the very fabric—rayon—that had made her company a success in the first place. Sixty percent of the clothing made today uses some form of polyester, while 30 percent is made from cotton and the remainder is manufactured from wool and other fibers. The production of polyester uses chemicals that are carcinogenic to humans and toxic to the environment. “The fashion system is applied physics,” says Fisher. “Seventy-five percent of the impact on the world comes from our materials, and the remaining damage comes from the physical processing of what we manufacture.” Fisher’s first step was to trace the rayon her company was using, “It became clear to me that we had to lose some of our best-selling fabrics.”

Dropping your number-one-selling fabric is nothing if not a commitment. In big-business terms, it’s a whopper of a decision that gives the adage of shooting yourself in the foot the air of understatement. But it is precisely this sort of revolutionary thinking that is a requirement should the fashion industry make it-
self responsible for the monumental
damage it does, let alone what the
messaging of a clothing manufac-
turer needs to be in terms of trans-
parency. “The DNA of what I stand
for is what I’m wrestling with right
now,” Fisher says of her move away
from rayon. “I’m a problem solver,
but I want to be transparent about
how involved this process is.

“I started out by asking if you can
have blended fabrics without caus-
ing harm. I discovered that there
was an abundance of complexities
around the farming of even organic
cotton, in addition to tanning and
dyeing, all of which waste and pol-
lute water. That led me to ask what
happens at the other end when fab-
rifies begin to break down. I’ve real-
ized that we’ve got to re-understand
and redefine what quality of mate-
rial is and can be,” Fisher explains.
“It’s not about being perfect on
the outside. It has to be about resell-
ing becoming more of our profitable
business and how we put those
profits back into recycling.

“Not to mention the wholesome-
ness of how we sell product and take
responsibility for the whole planet,”
she adds. “How do we show up
every day and reconcile profits with
what matters. I’m trying to simplify
that equation for my customer by
getting rid of the anxiety she feels
about the environment. I want her
to feel okay about wearing the same
thing every day and to be proud
about what that says about her.”

Shona Quinn, Fisher’s Sustainabili-
ty Leader, has been with the com-
pany for 12 years, inspecting and im-
proving the company’s supply chain
and agricultural practices. Much of
that time has been spent traveling
the globe—to places such as remote
regions of China, Australia, and
Peru—to verify that her vendors’
farming and dyeing practices don’t
conflict with the company’s policies.
Quinn now works closely with the
design team on ways to implement
circular thinking. “My trips were a
way to seek out best practices and
how Eileen Fisher could support
that,” she says. “It woke me up.
There’s a lot of really exciting things
happening in the apparel sector,
but we have a long way to go.”

Quinn is not optimistic when she
sees how the retail model has been
turned upside down by direct-to-
consumer marketing and how that
increases waste by making it so easy to get product into the customer’s hands. “The industry as a whole faces a big philosophical question,” she says. “We need to create new business models—change habits of the consumer and how we deliver product to them. We need to look at other industries like Tesla and see how their factories work. It would be great if there was a cultural shift. Why do we have this need for treating fashion as entertainment to give ourselves a lift? Our Tiny Factory touches on the sharing economy and that’s a positive, but ultimately brands will need to partner up to brainstorm how to create their systems.”

Instead of rayon, Fisher and her team have started using Tencel, a hybrid made of cellulose from wood pulp. She, Quinn, and their design team have experimented with how to add Lycra to organic cotton, and they are investigating how to embrace and create technology that supports fabric innovation. And then there is the Tiny Factory, Fisher’s heart-and-soul hub for the upcycling program she started eight years ago. To date it has reclaimed, renewed, and either resold or reused nearly 1 million garments. “I started asking my employees to return their Eileen Fisher clothes they no longer wore,” Fisher says. “Then we invited our customers to return their clothes and offered them gift card incentives.”

Fifty percent of Fisher’s reclaimed clothes are washed and resold under Fisher’s Renew program. Renew sales generate nearly $3 million annually, accounting for nearly 2 percent of the company’s overall sales. So far in 2018, those numbers have increased up to 4 percent. The remaining 50 percent of the reclaimed clothes are sent to the Tiny Factory in Irvington, where they are sorted by fabric, style, color, and size and then painstakingly inventoried by hand, cut into stacks of identically sized shapes, and logged into a spreadsheet. Then her Remade design team looks at the stacked inventory of used factory fabric and figures out ways to create patterns for new clothes made out of old stock. Think: a jumpsuit made out of five pairs of pants, a slip dress crafted out of 20 silk tops. “The inventory allows for scalability,” says Carmen Gama,
the Remade design team at the Tiny Factory. “We engineer patterns to accommodate patchwork construction and then play with the seaming to make it look modern.” The remaining unused fibers are then sent to the DesignWorks department at the Tiny Factory, where they are put through a felting machine and turned into home furnishings, such as pillows, rugs, and wall hangings. DesignWorks is overseen by Fisher’s longtime friend and first employee, Sigi Ahi. “Most of these pieces have over 30 years of fabric felted into one run,” Ahi says. Ahi’s most recent one-of-a-kind houseware creations were exhibited at the Salone di Mobile in Milan in April.

“Modern” doesn’t quite capture the beauty and handicraft of Fisher’s Remade items. One man’s trash may be another man’s treasure, but what’s happening at the Tiny Factory reminds one more of the pleasure of unearthing an exquisite discovery at a high-end vintage shop. In fact, Fisher plans to open a store this fall in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, where the Remade bomber jackets and dresses will be sold at significantly higher prices than her main line. The justification for the elevated price tag needs no explanation: Each piece carries with it hundreds of hours of attention. And for all the effort to commodify vintage fashion on a large scale, each item looks and feels unique, and—contrary to what one might imagine eco-friendly to mean—luxurious.

When redefining the ethics of fashion, it’s only fitting that terms like “luxury” are retrofitted to suit a more ethical society and not one based solely on greed at all costs. The shopping habits to support this new economy may not be realized until the next generation comes of age, seeing that millennials don’t yet shop with an eye toward sustainability. But Fisher is not judgmental. Rather, she is sympathetic to the daily and heroic effort needed to stay conscientious. “I struggle to process all this,” she says. “Sometimes I can’t find the threads to weave it all together, and I feel confused and like I’m failing. The reality is that more things don’t work than do work, so I’ve just tried to get used to that. I don’t run from it, and I no longer push away what scares me. Hopefully, others can benefit from what I learn along the way.”

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