

## 100% Sustainable Products Now! by Edwin Datschefski

Every day each of us changes the world. We change it primarily through the side-effects of the physical transformation of materials that make up the products, energy and food we consume. Unfortunately this change is almost always detrimental, as even for products that seem beautiful on the outside, there is a hidden ugliness behind them — an ugliness caused by exploitation of workers, releases of pollution and destruction of habitats. The world is so fundamentally wrong when it comes to the way products are designed and made that it's hard to comprehend.

In a strange kind of blessing, these horrors below the surface are starting to manifest themselves in ways even the most thick skinned sceptics can no longer deny, and this has spurred many nations and businesses to radically improve their products and industrial and agricultural processes. Yet there is still a huge mountain of product types, perhaps hundreds of millions, that need to be redesigned to be properly compatible with nature.

In a very pure way materials can be borrowed from nature to make a physical product, and returned once the product is finished with. Examples of such borrowing would be drystone walling, woven willow fences and other traditional methods. When these materials are returned to nature, they continue on their geological or organic pathways, and the cycles of life are unbroken.

The old ways are no longer practical, so can we achieve similar purity in the design and manufacture of everyday products today? This is the simple goal. Mass-produced products need to be designed to be cyclic at a molecular level, able to be consumed in turn by recycling machines or composted by microorganisms and rebuilt with no persistent wastes into new materials and new products once more.

All products are as ultimately as ephemeral as a leaf. The average household object has a useful life of only a few months. So they need to be as easily assimilated back into the system as a leaf is. From earth to earth to earth.

This is not just about the obvious things like recycled paper or recyclable packaging. We now have the techniques and technologies that make it easy for people to design or redesign any product at all and make it better, from

barbecues and binoculars to suitcases and swimming goggles, from cars and lipstick to ocean liners and sushi.

Around the world, small business in particular are developing new ideas and methods to make products better. Big business is also latching on and making significant changes to mainstream products, albeit with a hefty dose of 'greenwash' in some cases.

There has been such a dilution of the term 'sustainability' that it seems even a slight benefit to the community or a modest saving in energy use gets described as sustainable. Instead we need to think about becoming 100% Sustainable on an absolute level, a threshold which we are as yet far from attaining, but one that is theoretically and practicably achievable in our own lifetimes.

100% Sustainable products are renewable, efficient and fair. This means totally renewable (cyclic, solar and safe) and super-efficient in their use of materials and energy. It means fair to humans in the form of workers, neighbours, shareholders and consumers. But also, as has been too often overlooked, fair to non-humans. We need to be fairer to the wildlife and all the species of plant and animal whose habitats we are trampling in our blind rush to extract materials.

In the 21st century we must recognise that becoming 100% sustainable is not only possible, but required. We will not achieve this while there is still the widely held misconception that sustainability is optional, or that it is some kind of moral behaviour that requires unilateral individual sacrifice in favour of the environment.

Deep within each of us is the feeling that we are part of a larger whole, and that the everyday, institutionalised violation of nature to bring us our daily needs is profoundly wrong.

Humans and non-humans are part of the same system, so when we harm nature we are committing self-harm as surely as a razor blade in our own arms.

As managers, designers, regulators or simply as individual consumers, by conceiving and supporting 100% sustainable product systems we can assuage those feelings and start to understand the path to true sustainability that lies before us.