

Lifestyle

Melbourne's Etiko makes sports shoes ethical, vegan, socially responsible

It's not enough to just walk the walk in a bid to boost your environmental cred. If you want to give yourself a sporting chance, take a look at the shoes you're wearing.

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If you thought you'd moved into the guilt-free zone because you're walking to work or jogging at lunch, don't congratulate yourself too quickly.

Those athletic shoes you're floating on are constructed of petroleum-sourced EVA and PVC, which create carbon emissions in their manufacture and can take 1000 years to break down in landfill – a problem when you consider that Australian dumps are accepting about 30 million pairs of shoes every year.

And then there's ethical labour: fair trade NGOs put the average labour component of athletic shoes at less than 1 per cent of the retail price, yet the shoes are labour-intensive, being made by armies of women at non-unionised factories in Asia.



Guilt-free walking: Etiko sells organic, biodegradable, vegan shoes that come from a supply chain free of sweatshop, child and slave labour.

And there's no incentive for change: global sports shoe sales reached US\$46.5 billion (\$63 billion) in 2013, up from US\$29 billion in 2007 – and the major companies now release a new model range every six weeks.



surfaces. Nike also boasts of a supplier's code of conduct designed to enforce minimum labour practices in the supply chain. The Brooks shoe company has a non-EVA mid-sole construction, and the Newton Running company is a 'B Corp' – a sort of fair trade for companies.

But another way to attack the sports shoe problem is to build it properly in the first place, as an Australian company has done.

Melbourne-based Etiko makes a sneaker that looks like a Converse Chuck Taylor, but ticks all the social responsibility boxes.

"We're helping people shop their values," says Etiko founder Nick Savaidis. "You can tell people to buy products that come from ethical labour, but where would they buy their sneakers?"

The Etiko sneakers' soles are made of FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) rubber, the uppers are certified organic cotton canvas, the manufacturing is free of worker exploitation (sweatshop, child labour, slave labour) and the product can call itself "vegan", thanks to its non-animal glues and dyes.

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Etiko founder Nick Savaidis, with the eco, ethical and vegan sneakers being worn by the young and hip.

Savaidis introduced the Etiko sneaker in 2007 and the current \$90 model is the fourth edition of a shoe that has sold more than 13,000 pairs.

"We're a small team, with no budget," says Savaidis, whose journey started as a child in Melbourne, watching his mother doing piece-work sewing. "Our customers have been activists and early adapters, but if you give Australians a real choice they'll buy shoes from companies that support communities."

The Etiko sneakers are made in a carefully selected Sri Lankan factory, the joining of the upper and the sole is now done by "vulcanising", and the water-based gluing

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"We have to be a generative business, not just a sustainable one," says Savaidis. "We need to generate profits to expand and attract investors."

Savaidis has also been reducing the number of parts in the shoe, which means revisiting the "motion control" in most trainers – the heel, ankle and arch supports that require so many inserts and metallic fabrics. He says there is little evidence the human foot needs so much external help to do its job.

The Etiko sneaker is on a simplification journey similar to the Vivobarefoot running shoe, which starts from the position that all the foot needs is protection from puncture and help against cold. The stripped-down Vivo shoe has an ultra-thin sole and minimal upper and is designed to simulate 'barefoot' motion. It means the company uses much less virgin materials in the construction (it mostly uses recycled PET and rubbers) and allows the foot to operate more naturally.

At the University of Western Australia, a student-driven initiative called ReShoe collects used but re-saleable shoes and sends them to community groups in Africa, who can sell them at market.

While the athletic shoe underpins healthy walking and sports, its broader problems are emerging. In a 2013 report called *The Effects of Physical Activity on Greenhouse Gas Emissions for Common Transport Modes in European Countries*, a comparison of car, bus, bicycle and walking showed the car produced more CO₂ per passenger-kilometre (205), than walking (83.7).

While this was as expected, the report – co-authored by University of Melbourne academic, Professor Robert Crawford – found that almost half of the emissions from walking (36.7 gCO₂ per passenger-kilometre) was in the form of "manufacture and disposal" of the sports shoes, while cars and buses have only 32.9 gCO₂ attributable to manufacture and disposal.

Athletic shoes are predominantly made of EVA and PVC, hence the emissions created in making and dumping them. We also turn over our trainers at least once a year, whereas a car or bus is operated for 10-20 years. The biggest drawback could be the lack of recycling or re-use associated with athletic shoes.

Robert Crawford speaks of "Design for Disassembly" – well-established in construction and automotive industries – which could be used by shoe makers. It means designing the recovery, recycling and repurposing of the product or its component parts, rather than building in obsolescence that can only end at the dump.

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