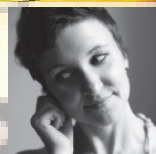


GREEN GODDESSES: GOING GLOBAL

Whether it's harnessing renewable energy or aiding wild animals in their natural habitat, women around the world are playing formidable roles in green industries. Read on and be inspired

TEXT RENEY LIM



TARA ST JAMES,
owner and head designer
of sustainable fashion label
Study, New York City

Born and raised in Montreal, Canada, but a resident of Brooklyn since 2004, Tara has already established herself as a force to be reckoned with in the world of eco-friendly fashion. Her label, Study, which she started in 2009, has featured the use of hand-dyed ikat silks and no-waste patternmaking, a testament to Tara's boldly inventive approach which is "inspired by restrictions".

Last year, Tara was the recipient of the Ecco Domani Award for Sustainable Design. She also acts as the fashion director for The Uniform Project, and is a mentor at the Awamaki Lab, a program that fosters cross-cultural partnerships between young designers and Peru's Awamaki indigenous weaver collective.

"Fast and cheap fashion is one of the greatest challenges that face me. Most consumers don't understand why they shouldn't buy a \$5 T-shirt that was made in questionable conditions when the alternative is a \$60 organic tee that was made locally. I understand in financially difficult times, the

appeal of something new and cheap is irresistible, so I believe the only thing that will change this is more education for the consumers. The fast fashion houses won't change their practices until their customers begin to demand that they do—and that won't happen until the consumers are educated about their purchasing power.

I only started learning about sustainable practices in fashion design when I was working on my previous label, Covet, in 2004 and was charged with all the fabric and production sourcing myself. Since then, the information available to designers has grown in vast quantities.

Fashion shouldn't be fleeting, disposable or trendy. I aim to create a dialogue between my customers and my clothing; I want a relationship to develop and I want them to keep my pieces in their wardrobes for as long as they last, so I try to design without trends in mind, making convertible garments that customers can play with and make their own. I also feel it is very important to develop a relationship with my suppliers so I know where the textiles come from and how they were made.

I love materials that have a story and can tell me where they were made and why. I use a lot of hand woven ikat from India, and I've now started incorporating hand-woven cotton and silk khadis from India as well. These are made in small villages by weavers who pass down their tradition from father to son and take a great amount of pride in their work. There is also much less energy consumption in this method of weaving as most of the process, including picking of the cotton, carding, spinning and weaving, is all done by hand rather than machine.

Ultimately, I just want to make great clothing that people want to wear. The caveat is that I have to feel good about how and where they're made."



DR. YOLANDA PRETORIUS,
coordinator and
ecologist at Eco-
SUSTain Africa
(ESUSTA), Limpopo

Armed with a wealth of experience in wildlife conservation and research (not to mention a PhD on large herbivore foraging ecology), Yolanda had already decided from a young age that she wanted to take care of animals in the wild. She founded ESUSTA in 2011 in order to assist wildlife reserves and parks in developing research programs to ensure the sustainability of various species in those areas.

She currently helps manage an elephant and cheetah monitoring programme in northern South Africa, and works to rehabilitate caracal cats in areas where they face extinction. This year, she aims to establish a field-based research centre that focuses on developing a wildlife management model, and to teach people how to utilise natural resources sustainably in the African savannah.

"I was a very shy child and my best friends have always been animals. After my first year at university, I decided that I preferred being in the bush and taking care of wild 'healthy' animals. I volunteered at a private game reserve during university breaks, which is where I fell in love with elephants for the first time – I had a chance to get close to these animals in a more relaxed manner and realised how incredibly expressive, sensitive and intelligent they are.

Working with wildlife can be very challenging and requires a lot of patience, but the often unexpected rewards far outweigh these efforts. One of the most memorable was to have a caracal that I helped reintroduce back into the wild trust me enough to come and show me her wild-born baby. As for unforgettable encounters, one that sticks in my mind is a day when I couldn't find any elephants to observe for my study in a nature reserve, so I gave up and headed back to camp after sunset.

Just as the full moon rose, I suddenly found myself in the middle of a wild herd of elephants, which came so close that I could touch them. Suddenly, a huge bull appeared beside my open

vehicle, his tusks glistening in the moonlight – I thought that he was going to trample me, but he simply moved towards a female elephant two metres away from me. It was incredible, and I cried because it almost felt like, just for that moment, they had accepted me as part of the herd.

The biggest threat to elephants now is the destruction of their habitats to make space for agriculture and development. Our African wilderness is slowly disappearing and yet, when we look at what is left in the world around us, it is still our greatest asset. Wilderness is eventually what mankind will need to return to in order to understand nature's laws and to learn how to survive in harmony in a sustainable manner.

In South Africa, elephants are forced to stay in enclosed parks and fenced-off reserves, preventing them from migrating over large distances, like they evolved to do. Under these conditions, their populations soon expand beyond what these areas can sustain, leading to further habitat degradation.

When wildlife are kept in small, enclosed areas and with species compositions and numbers unnatural to the local habitat so that tourist operations can guarantee close encounters, ecological processes are soon lost. Having a close encounter with a wild animal is not a right, but rather, a great privilege that needs to be earned.

For any woman interested in this career path, my advice is to never give up and to always trust their natural instincts and the voice of Mother Nature deep inside when dealing with wildlife. Until recently, the wildlife industry has been dominated by men, and although it's still hard to have your voice heard as a female, the importance of the motherly and caring female opinion is slowly gaining ground."



**MOLLY
ROCKAMANN,**
*Founding Director of
EarthDance Farms,
Missouri*

Here's to a woman with a proper green thumb: Molly, who isn't afraid to get her hands dirty when she works the earth, has degrees in Environmental Studies and Ecological Horticulture from Eckerd College and UC-Santa Cruz, but considers the land and other farmers to be her greatest teachers.

Her experience ranges from working with mushroom producers in Ghana and organic rice farmers in Thailand to vegetable farmers in Florida and California, and sugarcane farmers in Fiji. She is currently overseeing the growth of 'an abundance' of vegetables, herbs and flowers, including husk cherries, lemon cucumbers, watermelon radishes, and "greens that have a little kick to them" (which Molly loves), like bak choy, arugula and red mustard.

"Since I was an adolescent, I've been very conscious of the fact that we as humans are making too heavy a footprint on the earth, and I've looked for ways to lighten that impact. I also became fascinated by nutrition and plant-based foods at a young age, so to me, farming was the intersection of my passions.

The simplest way to explain organic farming is that it works with nature, whereas chemical farming attempts to overcome nature. Our farming methods are based around building soil health naturally, using slow-release natural fertilisers like compost, aged manures, and cover crops. We treat pests and diseases with nature's best defence mechanisms, such as beneficial predator insects or safe natural pesticides or fungicides, and crops are often rotated so as to not deplete the soil. There is a big focus on biodiversity so that a single pest or disease cannot wipe out an entire farm.

Sustainable farming is necessary if we want to become in balance with the earth's natural ecosystems. The overuse of herbicides and pesticides has created havoc not only on human health, but also in farming systems themselves. There are now 'superweeds' that do not respond to strong herbicides, and 'superpests' that have quickly evolved to eschew the pesticides farmers have sprayed at increasingly higher levels to achieve the same results. People complain about paying higher prices for organic food, but why

aren't people willing to pay more for food that doesn't contain poisons?

I feel really blessed to be doing what I'm very passionate about. My three favourite parts of my job are: working in the fields with our farm apprentices, talking to young people about growing and eating healthy food, and seeing our graduates go on to start farms or initiate really great gardening projects. There's still a huge need to educate more people about the real costs of putting food on our plate; it's one thing to acknowledge that we should grow and eat organically, but it's another thing entirely to understand what it's going to take at every level - personally, politically, and economically - to make that possible for everyone.

Men farmers still outnumber women farmers in the U.S., but each year, that gap shrinks as more and more women start farms or take up farming as their occupation. What is grossly understated is the influence that women have on world food production: while women are still in the minority when it comes to land ownership, most of the world's food that is grown directly for human consumption is raised by women. Also, women are usually the ones responsible for food purchasing and preparation, so we have a huge influence on what is bought, sold, and consumed worldwide."



NEHA MISRA,
*Chief Collaboration
Officer at Solar Sister,
Washington, D.C.*

Let there be light, indeed – such is the basis of Solar Sister's bold vision of a global women-driven, clean energy revolution. A social enterprise that provides women in East Africa with training and support to create solar micro-businesses, it partners the benefits of sustainable energy with that of empowering and educating women – female entrepreneurs and consumers.

As an experienced energy economist, Neha works towards building public, private and people partnerships across a diverse set of stakeholders, including solar technology partners, implementation partners, impact investors, government agencies, local leaders and committed individuals from around the world, in order to expand Solar Sister's network of entrepreneurs and improve energy access for millions.

"Over 1.6 billion people – a quarter of humanity – do not have basic access to electricity, not even a single light bulb! Those without electricity access rely on expensive, insufficient, hazardous and unhealthy kerosene lanterns and candles for light.

Energy poverty also has a female face: 70 percent of these are women and girls, a large proportion of them in rural parts across the developing world. This is a number to be concerned about since electricity access is linked to every aspect of development, be it better economic growth, improved education, public health or saving the environment. How can we achieve global peace and prosperity if so many people live in darkness?

What attracted me to Solar Sister was its simple yet powerful approach to address the critical issue of energy poverty and its gender dimension, by presenting a grassroots, gender-inclusive and market-based model to provide clean energy in rural Africa, where nearly 600 million people live without electricity. It marries women power with solar power in a way that is both sustainable and scalable across Africa and other parts of the developing world affected by extreme energy poverty.

Today, 132 Solar Sister entrepreneurs in Uganda, Rwanda and South Sudan are bringing the benefits of life-transforming solar solutions to over 17,000 people in East Africa. We have proven

that our model works – that starting with a micro-consignment inventory investment, a self-funding entrepreneur can be set to spread the benefits of solar light via our direct selling model.

We provide African women with a 'business in a bag': a start-up kit of a variety of clean energy products, along with the training and marketing support to launch their own micro-solar businesses. The products in the bag include portable solar lights, mobile phone chargers and radio battery chargers. Solar Sister entrepreneurs sell on consignment, which means they pay for the inventory after they sell it, earning a ten percent commission on each sale.

The real impact of this opportunity in their lives lies in their personal stories: for example, Zuura Muhindo is a health worker, single mother of two little girls and a nursing student who somehow finds time to also be a Solar Sister. She is passionate about the need for light among the health care workers, especially the midwives, and has detailed the difficulty of sewing up an episiotomy in the dark after a difficult delivery. She uses the income from selling lamps to put herself through nursing school because her income as a certified nurse will be substantially better than as a healthcare worker.

We have found women in Africa are eager for the Solar Sister business opportunity that brings them improved income, cleaner and brighter light and confidence that comes from being in charge of your own destiny. Investing in women is not only the right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do. We've come a long way since Solar Sister was born in early 2010, but the audacity of our vision for a green economy inclusive of women power worldwide means that we have miles to go."