

Troubled Waters

The outdoor industry is beginning to pay attention to the big problem of microplastic pollution. BY COURTNEY HOLDEN

SMALL PLASTICS ARE a big problem. The more scientists look for microplastics (or tiny plastic particles smaller than 5mm—about the size of a sesame seed), the more they find, even in seemingly pristine areas such as polar regions, glaciers, and river headwaters worldwide. And with that understanding comes an uncomfortable truth: The outdoor industry’s synthetic textiles are contributing to the pollution problem.

“More and more, they’re finding these tiny bits of plastic everywhere,” said Matt Dewitte, head of marketing for LifeStraw, whose filtration systems remove 99.999 percent of microplastics from drinking water. “Everybody has heard about the problems in our oceans, but it’s in other natural water sources. It’s now showing up in municipal water and bottled water. Any of these places people thought were safe, these tiny pieces of plastic are showing up.”


When plastic waste from a number of sources ends up in waterways, it gets weathered, broken down, and eventually reduced to microplastics. And they’re everywhere: In its four-year look at microplastics in water sources across the globe, the nonprofit Adventure Scientists found that 89 percent of ocean samples and 51 percent of freshwater samples contained microplastic pollution.

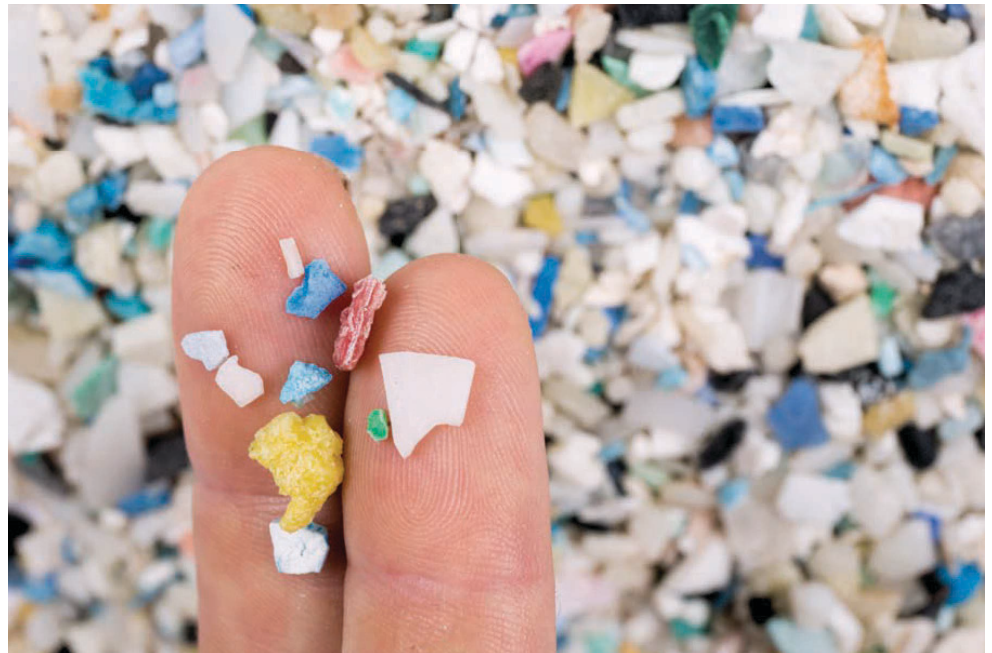
Many outdoor industry brands are already taking steps to reduce the amount of plastic that ends up in the oceans by creating garments made from recycled soda and water bottles (thus removing them from the trash stream). Patagonia has been doing so for more than a decade. Adidas Outdoor’s Parley lineup of shoes and jackets is made entirely out of plastics collected along beaches and waterways. And Carve Designs joins the ranks this season with its new Acqua Terra fabric, made from recycled plastics.

But such efforts aren’t enough. Reducing plastic waste is an important step, but Beth Jensen, senior director of sustainable business innovation at the Outdoor Industry Association, argues that the industry should now put microfibers in its sights. “Whether it’s the production process or the consumer washing a garment at home, fibers come off the garment. These tiny particles are washing off both natural and synthetic garments into the oceans and waterways,” she said.


PrimaLoft, which will introduce new insulation

products made from 100-percent post-consumer recycled plastic bottles this show, has an eye toward the microfiber shedding process. “That’s an issue that we are very much aware of and something that we are actively working on finding solutions for,” said Ken Fisk, the brand’s PR and marketing communications manager. Industry-wide solutions might range from developing new materials that don’t readily shed microplastics in the wash cycle to improving odor control technologies so consumers don’t have to wash their clothes as often. And at least one company has a fix on the market right now: The Guppyfriend Washing Bag, a mesh laundry sack that traps the tiny fibers for proper disposal.

Jensen points out that the outdoor industry is just a small contributor to the problem, but could take on an outside role in helping find a solution that’s good for business and the planet. 



TAKING STOCK OIA Debuts First-Ever Sustainability Report

 “We can’t ignore how our products are made and how that impacts our communities,” said Beth Jensen, senior director of sustainable business innovation for OIA, at the release of the sustainability benchmarking report yesterday.

Consumers certainly aren’t ignoring it: A recent report released by Cone Communications reveals that 86 percent of U.S. consumers expect companies to act on social and environmental issues.

But there’s a knowledge gap regarding the impact of product creation. “The majority of consumers have no idea about the complexity of the supply chain,” Jensen said. For instance, 80 suppliers are used to make one tent. Furthermore, “Most consumers do not know where products are made. The majority of products—97 percent of apparel and 98 percent of footwear—is made overseas,” Jensen told a packed room of industry professionals.

The sustainability benchmark report focuses on environmental, social, and sustainability impacts related to supply chains and product manufacturing, based off of a survey of 150

outdoor industry representatives of 123 companies that are mostly small- to medium-sized businesses.

One finding revealed that small companies (defined as meeting \$2.5 million in annual revenue) have a lower adoption rate of the Higg Index, a scorecard for sustainability. The report also found that large companies (at least \$50 million in annual revenue) embed sustainability and a proactive mind-set directly into their business strategy, and, for some, the motivation was in part due to the overall benefits of efficiency.

The same is true of goal-setting around carbon: 17 percent of both

small and medium companies set goals related to carbon reduction, while 42 percent of large companies do so.

Moving forward, target-setting is important for individual companies and the industry as a whole to identify and capture energy efficiency. OIA intends to build out support for smaller companies to adopt the Higg Index, and thus propel the measure into the mainstream. “With the combination of the GDP and this OIA sustainability report, the outdoor industry has an opportunity to be a leader,” said Matt Thurston, REI’s director of sustainability.

—Morgan Tilton