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Illawarra op shops, charity bins not the only solution to getting rid of clothes



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Community

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Think putting unwanted clothes in a charity bin is a good deed? Few realise about 90 per cent of donations will never end up in an op shop. So where do you take your old pants you no longer need? DESIREE SAVAGE reports.

If you're clearing out your wardrobe and think your ripped acid wash jeans or rastafarian kaftan need a better home, a charity bin or op-shop are probably not the best solutions.

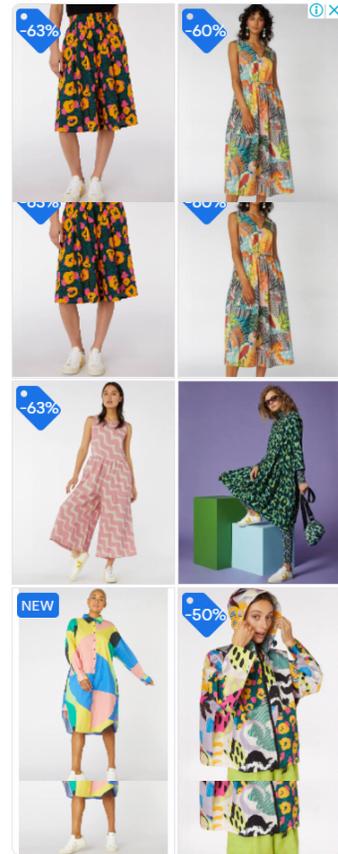
What most people don't realise, according to experts, is that a mere 10 per cent of donated clothing actually ends up for sale in a thrift shop so good intentions are really just rubbish.

An Australian Bureau of Statistics report found about 800,000 tonnes of textile, leather and rubber waste was discarded in the 2018-19 financial year, with just under 75 per cent sent directly to the tip - and these figures did not include the clothing and textile waste sent overseas.

So what do you do with old jeans or a faded hypercolour t-shirt shoved at the back of the cupboard?

The Mercury spoke with three experts on what happens to your pants, where your pants may end up and if anyone is actually wearing your pants.

"A lot of people donate to charity thinking it's a good thing to do and it is good, but more people donate than will buy so there's a supply and demand difference " said Green Connect general manager Kylie Flament "There are



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reference) said Green Connect general manager Kylie Flament. "There are millions of items of clothes, right here in the Illawarra, without a home."

The social enterprise only has "one little op-shop" but were trying their best to divert as much waste away from landfill with a lot of their discarded clothing sent overseas, but sadly some donations are still going to landfill.



H&M stores accept old clothing which gets sorted for reuse and recycling. Picture: Robert Peet

Ms Flament said not all clothing items were equal and classed as A Grade (shop worthy) B Grade (sent to a company who sorts them with most ending up in overseas second hand markets) or C Grade (goes to the tip).

"Some things just don't move ... they could be in great condition but no-one wants it - we can't hold stock forever, there's just too much of it," she said. "We have a problem in Australia, I think we're one of the top two or three countries in terms of how many kilos of clothes are bought every year and therefore have to go somewhere - they don't disappear. Most of them are not compostable, so our clothing discards are enormous."

Ms Flament suggested for people to "start small" like delay buying the shoes they think they desperately need or commit to buying one secondhand item this week or this month.

"People often get overwhelmed when they understand some of the problems we're facing when it comes to sustainability and it's hard to know where to start."

Kylie Flament

Lindle Epe is The Earth Stylist. She chose the path of educating and styling people on sustainable and ethical clothes after discovering the atrocities of the fashion industry when designing and releasing her first collection.

With the help of her husband (a Geographic Information Systems consultant), the Kembla Grange entrepreneur is growing [an online map directory of sustainable and ethical brands](#) which can be searched by location or brand.

To be added on the list, Mrs Epe goes through a checklist of whether the store or online shop is accredited, what fabrics they use, whether their supply chain is transparent and ethical, how they treat their waste at the end of the cycle.

"I began researching brands and realising there are no laws around what is sustainable, the accreditations there are various types, and learning about where clothes are made and what brands are transparent with their supply chains," she said. "I made me think there's 'something going on here!'"



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The Earth Stylist, Lindle Epe, says hiring outfits for an occasion is more sustainable than purchasing an item to only wear once - like the Zimmermann dress she hired from Glam Corner. Picture: Robert Peet

Mrs Epe is now passionate about making people aware of the realities of fast fashion - from old polyester pants ending up as landfill, hazardous chemicals used in the creation of garments and unethical labour practices overseas.

"It's important to me to help create positive change rather than just design and contribute more to the problem," she said. "Buy vintage and preloved, go to your local op shop - and I style people in op shops as well. I also encourage people to buy less and buy quality, instead of buying five t-shirts buy one and that one would last longer."

When styling her clients, Mrs Epe looks for garments that are ethically made without slave labour, are of natural fibres like wool, cotton and silk, and is a big supporter of shopping second-hand.

"We all have the power to create positive change for the industry, the people and the planet through the decisions we make in buying responsibly made fashion," Mrs Epe said. "It's up to us as consumers but it's also up to the governments by introducing laws and policies around how much brands produce and what they're doing at the end of the cycle with waste."

On May 26 the Federal government is hosting a roundtable on textile waste and bringing together the fashion industry, retailers, charities, fibre producers, researchers and waste management to stop dumping clothes in landfill.



The government has also just awarded a \$350,000 grant to Circular Threads, a new group to be led by The Australasian Circular Textile Association, look towards new technologies that can separate and re-purpose polyester and cotton components and create remanufacturing opportunities, and jobs in

Australia.

Currently only a handful of Australian companies are recycling textiles as the process is cumbersome and expensive, but it is slowly making progress.

Blocktexp is trying to develop a chemical process to separate textile components such as polyester and cellulose to be reused as raw materials for use in other industries; Textile Recyclers Australia recently partnered with Bathurst Regional Council for a three-month trial of taking old clothes for reuse and recycling; and Worn Up is upcycling non-wearable school uniforms and production off-cuts.

[Upparel \(formerly ManRags\)](#) is a company who take your unwanted pair of pants and can turn them into something new. The company on-sells for reuse as well as recycling textiles into things like kids' sofas, socks, handbags and underwear.

H&M (including Wollongong) and Zara stores have clothing bins designated for unwanted clothes (regardless of brand or the condition) and will be sorted into different categories to be re-worked, reused (like for cleaning rags) or recycled as textile fibres (which can be used for things like insulation, or to blend with new fibres to make a new garment).

The Cleanup Australia organisation has other ideas on what to do with clothes you'd no longer dare to wear like: clothes swapping with friends, rent an outfit for a big event rather than purchase, or learn how to repair garments.



 Wollongong fashion designer Gina Barjeel uses sustainable and ethical fabrics, while minimising waste by making to order. Picture: Robert Peet

Local councils and community groups often hold workshops on how to fix things - like [The Tinkerage at the Dunmore Resources and Recycling Centre](#), [Kiama Council is running a one-off mending workshop on June 5](#) to give residents the skills to fix a zip or a hole, while sustainable fashion designer [Gina Barjeel is running a series of free "fashion flips" at Wollongong City Library](#) every Tuesday, for sewers of all ages to learn to mend or upcycle some old jeans or bedsheet into a funky shirt.

"I was raised in a family that used to upcycle everything from reusing containers and jars, to redesigning our clothes," the Wollongong creative said. "My aunt was a dressmaker in Jordan for almost 50 years and she used to teach women and young ladies how to sew and how to make garments.

"It was my Aunt who made me fall in love with fashion. She used to live next door and I can remember sitting next to her and admiring her work. I fell in love with it. The sound of the scissors cutting the fabric, looking at her making the garments."

The [designer's collections are online and made to order](#), cutting out wastage from excess stock. She also uses natural fibres and minimises the use of nylon and polyester, with a focus on quality garments for her customers.

"The fashion industry is one of the most harmful industries in the world for the environment so we are trying to minimise the mass production and being a slow fashion brand," Ms Barjeel said. "The first year of the business was and still is a learning curve ... but I wanted to be sustainable."

Each Australian discards on average 31 kilos of textiles each year, according to government figures, and it's only a problem that will get worse unless people start thinking more about what they're wearing and what happens to an old pair of pants.

"People often get overwhelmed when they understand some of the problems we're facing when it comes to sustainability and it's hard to know where to start," Ms Flament said. "Just make one small change and when you're ready make another small change and it gets easier with each step. It doesn't matter where you start it's all heading in the right direction."



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