

RUNWAY

Patagonia Has a New Mission to “Save Our Home Planet”—One of Its First Employees Explains How They’ll Get It Done

BY EMILY FARRA
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Patagonia has always enjoyed its outsider status. Since Yvon Chouinard started the company with a few adventurous friends in 1973, he’s happily rebelled against expectations: To this day, Patagonia has never collaborated with a fashion brand, nor does it work with influencers or advertise in fashion magazines. It began investing in [regenerative agriculture](#) long before we were talking about soil health, and it has never hesitated to take a stand on political issues: In 1990, a donation to Planned Parenthood resulted in legions of angry customers and calls for boycotts; Patagonia responded with... more donations. In 2018, the company [sued President Trump](#) in a battle to keep one million acres of red rock canyons in Utah federally protected, and ahead of the 2020 election, Patagonia released a [pair of shorts](#) with four words on the tag: *vote the assholes out*. Patagonia has taken the fashion industry to task, too, speaking out against greenwashing and creating anti-Black Friday campaigns, like 2011’s *New York Times* ad with [a simple plea](#): “Don’t buy this jacket.”

Only recently has fashion embraced Patagonia’s anti-establishment views and dedication to high-quality, earth-friendly clothing. Tomorrow, Vincent Stanley, Patagonia’s director of philosophy. Photo: Courtesy of Patagonia the company will be recognized with the Environmental Sustainability Award at the [2021 CFDA Awards](#), and the irony won’t be lost on anyone: a defiant outdoors brand taking the stage at one of the industry’s most glamorous events. Patagonia’s environmental and community programs manager for North America. Rebecca Goodstein, will accept the award alongside honorees and presenters like Zendava. Anva

Taylor-Joy, Iman, and Emily Blunt, with some of fashion's most prominent designers in the crowd.

How did Patagonia get here? I caught up with Vincent Stanley, one of the company's very first employees, to talk about Patagonia's environmental activism, its obsession with quality, and its unlikely role as a trendsetter—from upcycling and repairs to that iconic fleece jacket. (Loewe, Altuzarra, and Sandy Liang's sherpas all owe a debt to the Retro-X.) Stanley began as Patagonia's first sales manager, eventually led its editorial and marketing departments, and in 2013 took on his current role: director of philosophy. Slim chance you've seen that title on other job listings.

Tell me how you got started at Patagonia—and what exactly do you do as a “director of philosophy?”

“I intended to work at the company for six months, save my money, and go travel. And 48 years later, I'm still here. I was the original sales manager—I didn't know what that meant at the time, but they said, you'll figure it out. I did that for about 20 years, but vocationally, I'm a writer, so when I turned 40, I thought, I can't do this big job and teach myself how to write. So I left for 13 years and supported myself mainly by writing copy for Patagonia, then came in the back door to run the editorial and marketing department.

“I wrote a book with Yvon [Chouinard] called *The Responsible Company*, and I was really trying to get out of operational responsibilities. Yvon had taught these philosophy classes in the '90s, when Patagonia came out of a crisis during the recession. We'd been growing like mad, and all of the sudden, the growth stopped. So at a certain point, Yvon started taking 30 people at a time to places like Yosemite or the Marin Headlands, and we'd sit in a circle, gathered according to our functions—HR, design, production, sales, finance. And we hashed out how we wanted to conduct business. That became the heart of [Chouinard's book] *Let My People Go Surfing*.

“When I came back, I wanted to reinstate those philosophy classes, but with all of our employees up and down the ladder. So that's what I've been doing for about eight years. About a third of the time is working internally, a third as an evangelist for B Corps, and a third working with graduate students.

“When I consider how I stayed engaged with the company, it's been progressively. I was originally intrigued by the culture—it was all the climbers and surfers, and I liked that the company had this anti-authoritarian, informal atmosphere. The culture interested me first, and then gradually, the environmental work became more and more important.”

Mordechai Rubinstein in a Patagonia coat at New York Fashion Week in 2017. Photographed by Phil Oh

How does environmentalism intersect with Patagonia's philosophies? What does it look like throughout all of the departments?

“What we really focus on is quality: What constitutes quality at Patagonia? How do we have a shared definition? Because that’s important. And the second is environmentalism: How is it important to people in the different roles in the company? Twenty years ago, there were different subcultures in the company: the tree-huggers working with the environmental groups to save patches of land and stretches of water, the product people trying to make the best collection and stay ahead of the competition. Then you had the bean counters [in finance] trying to make sure some of the money stayed in the bank. There was a lot of opposition and tension among those groups, but nobody ever won.

“In the past 10 years, the business model has become much more dependent on environmentalism and activism. These constraints we’ve put on ourselves have actually resulted in innovations, and they’ve changed the way customers view us. If I were on the finance team 15 years ago, I’d just be looking at the numbers—you know, let’s increase the margin on fleece. Now, when we needed a new warehouse, the finance department was looking in Tennessee and Pennsylvania, and they realized the environmental implications of putting a 300,000 square foot warehouse on raw farmland. So they built it on a reclaimed coal mine. It wasn’t the enviros who came up with this—it was the finance team viewing it as their responsibility. It takes more work and more thinking, but in the long run, when you go through that process, you end up creating innovations that other people wouldn’t.”

How can other apparel companies adopt those kinds of restraints, linking the financial and environmental sides? What lessons should they take from Patagonia?

“One of the discoveries we made when we first switched to organic cotton [in 1996] was that even when we push the envelope, we’re basically an extractive company. We’re taking more from the planet than we’re repaying, but now we see the opportunity with regenerative organics in food and clothing. It’s not just about not using chemicals, you’re also doing minimal tillage, rotating crops, companion planting. You can grow more nutritious, better-tasting food using less water, fewer organic inputs, and have the potential to sequester carbon. All of a sudden we had a new north star, which is to do things that will actually give back to the planet.

“I also think something about clothing that we’ve lost in the past 50 years—and I’ve been in the business that long—is that clothes are much cheaper now than they were in 1970. The attitude now is very different. In fast fashion, people buy something, wear it seven times, and then toss it in the garbage. Everybody in the fashion industry can participate in reorienting our minds around consumption and around what we buy, so the relationship we form with our things is based on how long we’ve had them and where we wear them. It’s almost a return to what fashion was in the ’40s and ’50s, when women had really nice clothes, but not a lot of them. That seems like a much saner direction for our industry to go.”

I know Patagonia is big on repairing and upcycling clothes, too—there’s your Worn Wear program for secondhand and repaired items, and you work with studios like Suay to reimagine old pieces.

“Yeah, and I think younger designers are into that too. Our emphasis this Christmas is going to be on Worn Wear and DIY [repairs]. You know, we create a lot of new clothes, but we think the message we want to emphasize—particularly at a time of year when people tend to feel burdened by the amount of stuff they have to buy—is that there’s an alternative. You can do it this way, with secondhand and reworked clothing.”

With the pace of collections, campaigns, social media, and technology, is the “fewer, better” approach really possible at this point? How do you see fashion actually getting there?

“You even see it in museums—they have this pressure to produce a blockbuster every year, which they never had to do before. I think one of the lessons of COVID is that the amount of speed that we’ve generated in all of these activities has also been wearing us down. We discovered [the joys of] more time with family and friends, and just a time out from that pace. I think we also have some historical forces working

against that continued speeding-up of consumption and disposable goods. These pressures we're feeling with climate change, and even social issues—they're two sides of the same coin. We can solve the problems of inequality and the environment with some of the same measures."

Patagonia has achieved so much—what goals are you still working towards?

"As the environmental crisis got worse and we understood the potential to do good [through regenerative agriculture], we wrote a new mission statement. The old one was to build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, and use business to inspire solutions to the environmental crisis. Now, we're in business to save our home planet. That takes my breath away, because my God, that is so aspirational. But what I started noticing right away is that employees really started asking themselves, 'What does that mean for my collection? What does that mean for our team? How do we make that change?'"

It's aspirational, for sure. What are the challenges that could stand in the way?

"Almost 95% of our environmental impact is in our products—around 85% is our materials. So we want to get out of using any kind of virgin oil in polyester and nylon, and we want to switch to regenerative organic for all cotton. That will have a major effect. There are some environmental problems that are persistent, like micro-fleece shedding and the issue of durable water repellents, like PFOAS [toxic "forever chemicals"]. Those are challenges, but I think 10 years from now, we want to be net-positive on carbon; we would like to be even more engaged with our customers on activism and NGOs that are restoring all of the marginal areas of the planet that contribute so much to clean air and water—you know, wetlands, coastal lands, coral reefs.

"The twin goals would be to reduce our impact really quite a bit, and in line with the Science Based Targets. The second would be to amplify our activism on behalf of saving the planet."

What do you say to people who don't believe a brand or business should be so aspirational—that it should just focus on its role as a capitalist entity?

"Well, 50 years ago, a clothing company might say, I'm in business to make clothes. But they would also acknowledge that they had to pay their bills on time, and meet their payroll, and meet legal standards. What I'm thinking now, and the way Patagonia operates, is that our responsibilities have increased because of the severity of the social and the environmental crises. What used to be something you could let everyone else worry about—you can't do that anymore. Ultimately, nobody buys a raincoat from us to save the planet—they buy a raincoat to keep themselves dry. So it's our responsibility to make that raincoat in a responsible fashion.

"I just think this is a new time, and these are new responsibilities for businesses. But I don't think they're particularly onerous—they require us to work harder, but they're also much more engaging for the employees, and much more interesting for customers than just trying to come out with another wild idea every six months."

Is it realistic to think every business will take on those new responsibilities on their own volition? Or do we need regulations that would force companies to change? I'm hearing more and more brands insist that we need government intervention.

"I think you need help from governments, but you also need to help the consumer, because they don't have any information right now. You can't tell the difference between an organic cotton shirt and a non-organic cotton shirt by rubbing your fingers against the fabric. We helped start the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, and one part of their mandate was to create a consumer-facing index so you can take your phone right up to a pair of jeans and get a rating from Levi's, or Lees, or Patagonia. That way it isn't a question of one company fighting with the other to greenwash their products. The index was delayed during COVID, but I'm really hoping that it gets introduced. I think that it's almost always better to have change driven by consumers from the bottom up, rather than the top down. Companies are very used to adapting to changes in consumer tastes, and they comply reluctantly with government regulations. So I'd rather see a change of heart—and if not, then I think we will need restrictions on what we do."

You sound optimistic that a shift in consumer behavior is on the rise.

"Well, I'm always cautious about using the word *optimism*, or even *hope*, and it's something I've learned from Yvon. He's one of the most pessimistic people I know, and I understand why. He used to spend 250 nights a year sleeping outside, and in the course of his lifetime, he's

seen what's happened to the natural world. But he never gives up—the more threat he sees, the more he doubles down on action. And I think that's what we all should think about.

“There's a quote we used in *The Responsible Company* that comes from leaders of the Haida, a First Nations tribe in Western Canada. They said, ‘The most important right we have is the right to be responsible.’ If you think about that, it's really the source of our sense of agency and our sense of self—that if we realize something, we can act on it. So whether I'm optimistic or pessimistic, it doesn't matter; I don't know what's going to happen, but the focus of my actions should be to move in this direction, and believe that we'll be better off.”

GQ's Noah Johnson in a Patagonia jacket, left, with Satoshi Niibori at New York Fashion Week in 2017. Photographed by Phil Oh

You called yourself an “evangelist for B Corps.” We're seeing more and more fashion companies get certified. What does the B Corp certification mean for Patagonia, and why do you believe so strongly in it?

“With all of these new B Corps coming in, there's a sense of a movement building, and I'm really happy about that. It was really a movement of small companies for a very long time—we were one of the biggest, and now you have Chloé and Eileen Fisher and Natura, a cosmetics company in Brazil that's become the largest B Corp. I think it's good guidance for the apparel industry, because not only do you get some companions on the journey, but you also understand specifically the ways you can improve as an operator.”

Okay, let's talk fashion: Patagonia is really having a moment lately. It's influencing runway trends, everyone's wearing the fleeces, and, of course, the CFDA is recognizing it as a sustainability pioneer at the 2021 CFDA Awards. Does any of it surprise you?

“I do like that the fashion world is paying attention to Patagonia. We never viewed ourselves as a fashion brand—we were kind of anti-fashion, because part of making things that last a long time is to make them fairly conservative in appearance. So I think it's kind of nice, and it gives us more company [in the industry]. We're very grateful for this award—it's a really nice recognition, and I'm glad that the CFDA created it.”

So many young designers mention Patagonia as a company they aspire to—they want to get into regenerative agriculture, create their own take-back and repair programs, and take a stand for the planet and people. It's always a surprise to hear them mention Patagonia before other “fashion brands.”

“Well, that’s wonderful to hear. I’m grateful that younger designers are looking to Patagonia, but they shouldn’t just be looking at us. I mean, I think it’s going to be a very different world for creating apparel in 15 or 20 years. We’re going to need more radical new ideas from young people.”

Last question: I’m guessing you’ve collected some very special Patagonia pieces through the decades—what is your most cherished piece?

“I actually had a prototype of the original fleece jacket, the very first one we sewed. The woman who sewed it runs Patagonia’s archives now. I had that piece for—I don’t know—30 years? And it was really tattered. Those early pieces used to pill a lot. When it wasn’t wearable anymore, I wanted to give it back to the company, because it had some historic value, but at the time there wasn’t any place to put it. So for 10 years, it sat in the trunk of my car, and then we finally opened up the archives and I donated it. That piece went with me on my first cross-country skiing trip, my first big river trip... It would have been sewn the fall of 1975, so yeah—now it’s 46 years old.”

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