

# GORGEOUS WITHOUT GUILT

Peri Drysdale has turned a small hand-knitting business into an award-winning, internationally successful firm dedicated to sustainability.



**THE DAY BILL** Clinton came to town is a story Peri Drysdale is happy to tell again and again. But then you might too if you'd convinced one of the most powerful men in the world to promote your products.

"It was almost surreal," says Drysdale, founder and managing director of New Zealand clothing labels Snowy Peak and Untouched World, of her 1999 promotional coup in which she asked Clinton if

he could manage a photo of himself in her shirt. He obliged and a priceless promotional opportunity was sealed.

This is only one example of the go-getter qualities that have helped Drysdale turn a small, contract hand-knitting business into an award-winning, internationally successful firm with an ethics and environmental record to make the staunchest hippie proud.

Snowy Peak, the umbrella company and also the name of one of the clothing labels, was started by Drysdale in 1981. A nurse from the age of 17, Drysdale was worried about being stuck in a small university-sponsored house in Champagne, Urbana, USA, with two small children when her husband Alex's work took him there for a year. Drysdale couldn't continue her medical work – no to mention the fact there would be snow up to the windowsills. So to stave off boredom, Drysdale had a

neighbour teach her how to knit, came up with some patterns – mainly for baby and children's woollen clothing – found herself some outworkers and filed the business papers under the kitchen bench.

By 1990, she had 500 outworkers knitting jumpers, scarves and hats for the tourist market and during the late 1980s she had begun to export. During the same period Snowy Peak was one of the first in the world to begin development of a unique luxury fabric made from merino wool and the fur of a New Zealand pest, the possum. After several years in development the fabric, Merinomink, another successful Snowy Peak brand, was launched commercially in 1996.

Drysdale grew up on a farm in the middle of the South Island, a couple of hours' drive from Christchurch among stunning landscapes. So although Drysdale says she wasn't aware of having had a desire to save the environment from a young age, this fourth-generation New Zealander admits she has always felt connected to the countryside. "Those huge majestic mountains, the crystal-clear rivers, I knew it was something very beautiful, very special."

And in her exporting career, she came to realise just how special. When she was overseas selling woolly jumpers, she says, "I could see the response I got when I said I was from New Zealand. And I would think, 'All those markets have lost this and they're going to want to get it back. And we still actually have an option to keep it.'"

For Drysdale, her newest label – started in 1995 as a range of certified organic wool sweaters – had to be about more than just the pretty reflection New Zealanders like to see when they look in the international mirror. It had to have integrity too.

Peter Townsend, chief executive of the Canterbury Employers' Chamber of Commerce, echoed this sentiment recently when journalists quizzed him on Drysdale's work. "There are two things that are vitally important for the future of the country... the first involves the application of technology to our natural resources – exactly what Peri's done [with her innovative textiles]. The second is about positioning New Zealand products on a platform of integrity."



## "SHARON STONE AND FELICITY HUFFMAN ARE FANS OF THE BRAND."



Above: Peri Drysdale.  
Right: Daughter and head designer, Emily Drysdale.

Illustrating how this works, Drysdale talks about how Cameron Silver, an influential fashionista from Los Angeles, fell in love with Untouched World while in the country for Air New Zealand Fashion Week.

Besides signing on to help with the collections, Silver has since spread the Untouched World gospel in his own high-flying circles. And Drysdale seems to enjoy the fact that celebrities like Sharon Stone and Felicity Huffman, of *Desperate Housewives* are now publicly affirmed fans of the brand.

So why do they all like it? "If you look at how [Cameron Silver] became attracted to our product in the first place, you can see what the international appeal is," Drysdale explains. "First he was attracted to the design, then he got to the fabric [the organics and unusual fabric blends] and then he got to the values of the brand, at which stage he was really sold. That locked him in at a deeper level. And without those brand values you don't get the opportunity to engage with the customer."

As she has said before, simply shouting that you come from clean, green New Zealand isn't enough. You also need to come up with an ethical business that also makes money. Drysdale and her company appear to be most of the way there on both counts. Snowy Peak employs 130 staff, has five retail stores around New Zealand with a sixth opening shortly and around 500 stockists elsewhere, throughout Australia, Japan, North America and Europe.

And Snowy Peak's in-house initiatives

include "Elephant Monday", a monthly staff garage sale with the proceeds going to charity as well as a loan scheme so staff can buy energy-saving light bulbs and insulation for hot-water cylinders.


Another development is the Untouched World Foundation, a charity incorporated in 2000 which gets at least one percent of the total of that label's retail sales and which runs leadership programmes for young New Zealanders around environmental issues.

These kinds of initiatives have not gone unacknowledged. Over the past few years Snowy Peak and Untouched World have won a variety of awards and accolades, including the 2006 award for Ethical Governance given to Snowy Peak as part of the national *Deloitte/Management Magazine* Top 200 companies awards. And Drysdale herself also has an MBE for her services to New Zealand exporting.

Drysdale talks about her understanding of the "triple bottom line" by which her business operates. "Basically we talk about social, environmental and cultural sustainability. Environmental is about the footprint we are leaving on the planet. Cultural, we ask, 'What are we doing to enhance the understanding of all the different cultures we come into contact with?' And socially, we like everything we touch to have a positive social benefit."

But, it must be asked, how do they maintain their triple bottom line ethos when they're involved in the fashion industry, one of the most consumerist industries, where most companies make their money by encouraging buyers to throw everything away and start again every six months?

Head designer Emily Drysdale, Peri's daughter, says, "We don't see ourselves as fast or disposable fashion. So we research social trends rather than fashion trends. I think our clothing is timeless and sophisticated.

"My real passion," she says, matter-of-factly, "is making people feel gorgeous but not guilty." 

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