

# Waste not, want not

Can you be a fashionista and a credible greenie? Driven by a strong commitment to the environment, and an equally strong passion for fashion, Kate Pears came up with a way to make clothes-shopping sustainable instead of wasteful.

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**F**or many years Kate Pears faced a dilemma: she considered herself something of a modern greenie, but she also loved fashion. Unable to reconcile her materialistic love of the latest season's looks with her green ideals, she began to think about various ways in which she could make her own consumption of clothing more sustainable.

Clothing production leaves a large ecological footprint. For every new T-shirt created, roughly 150 grams of pesticides and fertilisers have been used. And the amount of water used in the production and transport of clothes bought by an average household each year is 150,000 litres.

Fashion, by its nature, stimulates excessive and wasteful consumption, because garments are produced and purchased with reference to fleeting trends, rather than need.

A 2005 Australian Institute report\* revealed that clothing consumption is the second most wasteful practice for young consumers and the third most wasteful practice for older consumers.

When Pears started investigating the idea of sustainable fashion, she was shocked by these statistics — and then surprised to discover that, for such a wasteful category, surprisingly little clothing actually ends up as landfill.

"I could measure the waste in economic terms," she says, "but I couldn't explain where it was going."

She came to the conclusion that clothing waste is 'hidden' waste.

"We tend to think of waste as something visible," says Pears. "But waste is not just rubbish — it's also items that are unused or remain inactive."

There are, Pears explains, some very deep social, cultural and emotional reasons for why people hoard their clothes and purchase so much more than they actually need.

"Clothes are on your body and are the most direct reflection of you. You identify less with, say, objects in your home."

Pears realised that to make fashion more sustainable, this hidden waste would have to be 'reactivated', or sent back into circulation as a useful garment. From this idea, My Sister's Wardrobe was born. Its mission: to discover if and how a clothing exchange would work.

Pears felt the time was right to introduce the concept of a clothing exchange, given the resurgence of interest in vintage and retro gear, as well as the massive success of online second-hand sales portals such as eBay.

The first My Sister's Wardrobe event was held in a room at the Windsor Castle hotel in Melbourne, set up with mirrors, clothing racks and makeshift changing rooms. As participants arrived with their unwanted clothing, they were given one button for each garment. They were then entitled to 'purchase' one item of clothing with each button.

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Kate Pears shows off some of the spoils from her exchange events: all these items are second-hand.

### G-spot

Australians spend more than \$10.5 billion annually on goods and services that are never or hardly used.\*

"I was putting a lot of the success of the event on the shoulders of what people would bring," Pears remembers. "I was worried about people thinking they had brought good stuff, but failed to receive anything of value in return."

Pears was also concerned that people would bring all their own clothes and pick up nothing, leaving her with a large pile of clothing to dispose of, and

defeating the event's purpose — to get the clothes back into circulation.

Pears could not have anticipated how successful the night would be. Strangers were talking, sharing their stories about the items they had brought.


"It was surprising how much pleasure people got from seeing their garments find a new owner," she says. "They were happier to see something of theirs get a new life, than they were to find something they liked from someone else!"

To Pears's delight, there was only a small pile of clothes left over. Practically all the items brought to the event — garments that were, until that night, hidden waste — had been 'reactivated'.

At the next My Sister's Wardrobe event, Pears collected follow-up information.

"I was able to ask people how they were using the garments they had previously picked up," she says. "People were wearing around 50 per cent of the clothing they had taken."

The best part of the My Sister's Wardrobe experiment, says Pears, is that the model she has developed can be used for virtually any non-perishable consumer item, from baby clothes to furniture to books. She recently held an offshoot event called Excess Baggage Exchange, to which people brought shoes, bags, belts and other accessories.

"It's a simple idea, the idea of sharing. It makes people feel good and best of all, it's an inherently sustainable practice," Pears explains. 

**MARGARET AMBROSE** is an environmental and lifestyle journalist based in Melbourne.

Find information about upcoming My Sister's Wardrobe events at [www.clothingexchange.com.au](http://www.clothingexchange.com.au)

\*THE AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE REPORT WASTEFUL CONSUMPTION IN AUSTRALIA (DISCUSSION PAPER 77) CAN BE ACCESSED ONLINE AT WWW.TAI.ORG.AU