

## Environment

Global Warming | Whale Watch | Conservation | Water Issues | Energy Smart | Earth Hour

You are here: Home » Environment » Conservation

Show site sections +

Search here...

GO

### In the right clothes for conservation

April 2, 2008

Page 1 of 2 | Single page

✉ 📄 A A



**Maria Arnold gives a lot of her profits away; but that is the whole point of her business, writes Sue White.**

Selling T-shirts may not be the way most environmentalists operate - but for Maria Arnold, the founder of Fully Stoked, her contribution towards protecting the planet took a surprising turn while she was working in the forests of Uganda.

"My whole life I wanted to work with chimpanzee conservation in Africa. I read Jane Goodall's book when I was nine years old, and was totally inspired," says Arnold, from the Canberra headquarters of Fully Stoked.

Following her dream, Arnold worked for every summer for a number of years in Uganda, but ultimately decided there might be better ways to help the chimpanzees than continuing to do research.

Back home, Arnold discovered a number of successful conservation projects she had worked on in Uganda were closing for lack of funds. "I told my colleague in Uganda - 'I'm going to get you some money from here; I'll start a business or something.'

"Or something" turned out to be Fully Stoked, an ethical clothing brand that is proudly sweatshop-free. Selling online and via wholesalers, the business gives a whopping 30 per cent of profits to environmental projects.

Arnold started it with \$7000 of her savings. Business advisers told her it would never work: she was paying three times more than competitors for ethically made products, and giving a huge percentage of profits away.

But Arnold was adamant. "I said if I can't do it ethically I'm not going to do it. I don't really need much; I'd rather be putting money towards something that's for our kids' futures, and for the planet."

After a slow start in 2004, about 18 months ago something shifted. Revamping the business by adding dozens more lines, and promoting the clothing first, and ethics second (the reverse of her initial approach), Fully Stoked snowballed from a one-person show to a company with seven full-time staff, six part-time employees, and a small office in the United States that deals with their US wholesalers.

"I can't imagine things are going to slow down. Every week is quite literally busier than the week before," Arnold says.

With profits shared among various conservation projects, the ethics Arnold has stuck to since the beginning are now part of her success. "I'd say one-third of our customers are really into the fact that our business is sustainable, another third just like the clothes, and another third really like both."

She continually looks for ways to reduce the company's own footprint.

### In the right clothes for conservation

Page 2 of 2

✉ 📄 A A

"At the moment we import from the US - which is not ideal. If I could get it here I would, but the reality is there's very little clothing made in Australia," Arnold says.

"We're about to make our own range here with merino wool and eucalyptus dyes, but in the meantime, our US supplier works in a very sustainable way. They have solar panels on their roof, get 20 per cent organic cotton into each item, and recycle all their scraps, so transport becomes a smaller part of the equation."

Her ethics have impressed those in the position to raise Fully Stoked's profile - Arnold has developed a good relationship with Hugh Jackman, who supports their work, and when she hosted her hero, Jane Goodall, on a recent Australian tour, Arnold couldn't have been happier: "I'd read her book when I was nine - and there she was, staying at my house!"

For Arnold, the only downside of ethical production is that it limits what they can sell. "We get approached by lots of manufacturers," she says. "One company from China said they had beautiful clothing they assured us was organic and sweatshop-free."

"I explained we have to be really careful, so I might send someone to look at their factory. I guess they didn't think I was serious, because I got someone from Austrade China to agree to go, but when we called to arrange the visit, the manufacturer disappeared. I never heard from them again."

While she despairs about those pretending to do the right thing, she is an optimist at heart. "I hope we become part of a growing movement that shows you can be ethical, and generous, and still successful," she says. "You have to hang on to the hope things will change, so we can turn things around for the planet and everyone that comes after us."

"We've still got time, but we can't muck around."



For the planet ... Maria Arnold puts ethics first.

