

SUSTAINABILITY

Inside the Kenyan apparel factory that doubles as a wildlife reservation

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Wildlife Works, situated on the Rukinga Wildlife Sanctuary, offers a blueprint for how brands can better connect to their communities.

In the southeastern corner of Kenya, Wildlife Works, an apparel factory that employs 70 people from nearby communities, is demonstrating how a manufacturer can better serve its local surroundings.

Wildlife Works, founded in 1997, manufactures clothing for its own brand as well as other small brands around the world. Its location on the Rukinga Wildlife Sanctuary, situated between two national parks, serves a purpose on its own. Poachers once used the area to access the adjacent national forests. The land where Wildlife Works sits is “crucial to protecting that ecosystem”, says marketing director Joyce Hu.

Wildlife Works has established a blueprint for businesses to be better connected to the communities around them. Its production model employs local workers and pays them fairly, uses local materials when possible including Africa-grown cotton and runs charitable programmes tailored to local communities' needs. The company's potential for forcing that shift in the industry more broadly seems limited given its size. But growing consumer

demand for more ethical and sustainable brands could put wind in its sails, at least as a model for other brands to look to.

Small, mission-driven and community-based brands “aren’t the envy of larger companies and therefore don’t get much attention”, says Forrester retail analyst Sucharita Kodali. “But they set great examples for other entrepreneurs and are often loved by their customers.”

The company’s model is radically different from the way many brands produce, which often spans the globe in pursuit of cheap labour and materials — to the point that even when a company wants to “give back”, it often [isn’t correcting past ills](#) or [reversing impacts generated elsewhere](#) in its supply chain.

“The conventional system is completely broken, and it’s based on the extraction of brown and Black bodies,” says Hu. “We really have to create a new system.”

The brand operates a store in Nairobi that attracts young working professionals who, she says, want fashion that’s sustainable, designed by Africans and made in Africa. It also creates jobs, employing local residents to make clothing in its factories and as rangers to protect the wildlife, while working with a network of women from the area who use their traditional artisanal skills to make items like baskets. Zanira Kasyoka, an office assistant at the Kenya factory who grew up in the region, says she’s noticed a decline in poaching among her own community as Wildlife Works has grown.

Basket weavers for Hadithi, a local organisation that manages Wildlife Works's local handicraft work.



The company's efforts target the "core of the issues" of sustainability more effectively than other mission-driven brands, says Kate Larsen, founder of social enterprise advisory SupplyEsChange and a former Burberry executive. But, she says, verifying any company's social standards for manufacturing can be difficult; additionally, individual companies operating ethically do not solve the larger problem that stronger labour laws are needed in the industry.

"We need good business, human rights, due diligence laws requiring companies to regularly publish how they assess risk across their global supply chains, then join and participate in multi-stakeholder led sector and country initiatives which publish on both supplier and buyer effort," Larsen says.

The majority of Wildlife Works' production is for other brands, including Uniform, Threads 4 Thought and Raven + Lily, that Hu says adhere to quality standards that have allowed Wildlife Works to carve out a niche for themselves within the supply chain. Often such niche brands otherwise struggle to find a high level of production quality for lower-quantity runs, she says. One brand, Texas-based Raven + Lily, sources baskets from Wildlife Works and is currently collaborating on future home and accessory collections as well as buying carbon offsets from the company, says CEO Kinda Lincoln.

Hu, who also co-founded the Sustainable Fashion Alliance, says Wildlife Works only works with brands that have shared values, but the process is one

of self-selection: its remote location and small-scale operation mean it may not be as flexible or accommodating of brands' demands as most manufacturers — and, she says, “that in itself filters brands that can and are willing [and] committed to working with us”.

Establishing close, mutually beneficial relationships with local communities is a distinct trait that sustainability consultant and advocate Aja Barber says only a few brands today exhibit; she points to Veja and Tonlé as leading examples. “Their brands are very much: ‘We want to not just take from these communities.’ They focus on giving back to the communities their resources come from,” she says.

The concept of generating positive impacts is one that's gained traction [in agriculture](#) in recent years, as sustainability advocates shifted their focus from organic farming — an improvement over conventional agriculture, which has degraded environments around the world, but doesn't necessarily do enough to restore that degradation — to regenerative farming. Fashion should be pushing for the same shift. Hu hopes that companies like Wildlife Works, however small, influence the industry mainstays to do better.

“If you're going to start producing anything anywhere, you want to start the production from a place that benefits that area that you're producing in — so it doesn't degrade the area, and doesn't extract the labour.”