BUSINESS

Preservation and Profit: 4 Companies That Use Sustainable Business Practices to Help Protect the Earth

BY ASHLEY M. BIGGERS, KRISTEN TRIBE, EM CASSEL AND TESS LOPEZ

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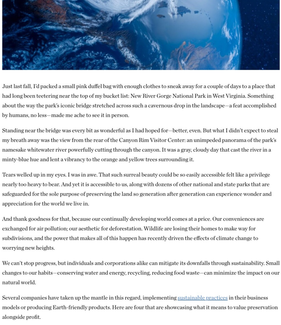
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Just last fall, I'd packed a small pink duffel bag with enough clothes to sneak away for a couple of days to a place that had long been teetering near the top of my bucket list: New River Gorge National Park in West Virginia. Something about the way the park's iconic bridge stretched across such a cavernous drop in the landscape—a feat accomplished by humans, no less—made me ache to see it in person.

Standing near the bridge was every bit as wonderful as I had hoped for—better, even. But what I didn't expect to steal my breath away was the view from the rear of the Canyon Rim Visitor Center: an unimpeded panorama of the park's namesake whitewater river powerfully cutting through the canyon. It was a gray, cloudy day that cast the river in a minty-blue hue and lent a vibrancy to the orange and yellow trees surrounding it.

Tears welled up in my eyes. I was in awe. That such surreal beauty could be so easily accessible felt like a privilege nearly too heavy to bear. And yet it is accessible to us, along with dozens of other national and state parks that are safeguarded for the sole purpose of preserving the land so generation after generation can experience wonder and appreciation for the world we live in.

And thank goodness for that, because our continually developing world comes at a price. Our conveniences are exchanged for air pollution; our aesthetic for deforestation. Wildlife are losing their homes to make way for subdivisions, and the power that makes all of this happen has recently driven the effects of climate change to worrying new heights.

We can't stop progress, but individuals and corporations alike can mitigate its downfalls through sustainability. Small changes to our habits—conserving water and energy, reducing food waste—can minimize the impact on our natural world.

Several companies have taken up the mantle in this regard, implementing sustainable practices in their business models or producing Earth-friendly products. Here are four that are showcasing what it means to value preservation alongside profit.

—Tess Lopez

B.PUBLIC Prefab

The building blocks to found panelized building system company B.PUBLIC Prefab fell into place during a conversation cofounders Jonah Stanford and Edie Dillman had with their eldest daughter. She wanted to know what their generation was doing to fight climate change. The question resonated.

Stanford, AIA and now B.PUBLIC Prefab's chief technical officer, had been working in sustainable building and felt he was pressing the boundaries of the eco-friendly measures he could accomplish with traditional building. Dillman, now CEO, was working to fill education and skills gaps and was confronting labor shortages in, among others, the building industry. Founded as a public benefit corporation in 2019, B.PUBLIC Prefab seemed a natural evolution. Along with cofounder Charlotte Lagarde, the company has taken a radical approach to construction and has affected the sustainability, affordability and accessibility of homes.

Reflecting on her conversation with her teenagers, Dillman says, "Our kids [are] pushing us toward this stuff.... That hesitation that we've developed experience of—*Well, it's not how it's been done, or is it really worth it?*—their generation is already there.... If there's a better way... of course you do that. They've just already so far advanced in their thinking and sustainability that they do have reason to be frustrated with our generation."

Based in northern New Mexico, the company manufactures prefabricated pieces that can be quickly assembled like Lego blocks to form the shell of a house. Building the panels in climate-controlled factories achieves 95% less waste; gone are the dumpsters full of construction waste. The airtight finished product is also incredibly energy efficient; they take 80% less energy to heat than homes built to standard requirements. Dillman compares B.PUBLIC Prefab homes to insulated thermoses: whatever goes in stays hot or cold, without additional effort to keep it that way. "If we build houses that way, they're nearly net zero before we've even begun," she says.

Educating builders and homeowners has been a hurdle—though both groups of stakeholders have adopted the product in New Mexico, Colorado, California and other locations. "I don't think [people] are empowered to understand how much they can affect the long-term health [of a building]. There's a lot of building to science to relay, and it takes time," Dillman says.

Amid housing shortages and sky-high home prices, B.PUBLIC Prefab is also helping build faster and more affordably. Builders can frame, insulate and seal a house in a matter of days, rather than weeks or months. Faster building times also mean lower costs because builders can reduce the carrying costs they have to manage and which they pass on to consumers via home prices.

Following the lead her children's generation is setting, Dillman believes sustainability should be integrated into every company—and not as an afterthought. "I don't think we can be in business and not be working on climate and climate change. Everyone is affected by it," she says. "And really, if we're not doing something good, [you have to figure out how to] change your practices or assess, really, is that business necessary at this moment?"

—Ashley M. Biggers

a&o Hostels

In 2015, a&o Hostels set out to learn more about its carbon footprint, or the total amount of greenhouse gases the company produced. That's when founder and CEO Oliver Winter says they realized they were sitting on a treasure trove.

"Because of the nature of our hostel, the spending or the production of resources... it's quite a bit lower than in other hospitality industry sectors," Winter says. The hostels were, by design, very space efficient, with four, five or six people in a room, while a hotel might only have one or two. They have no spas, no saunas and no minibars full of small, disposable bottles, all of which contribute to a higher carbon footprint in other room rental operations.

Armed with this information, the hostel chain—now the largest in the world with 40 locations in 10 countries—started to ask themselves, "How can we get that figure even lower?" That's when they set an ambitious goal: reaching a net zero carbon footprint by 2025. And as for how they'd get there? The innovation started with their employees.

Winter and his team reached out to the hostel chain's 1,000-plus workers to get ideas for how to shrink that carbon footprint. "We had an Excel spreadsheet with 180 action items, and then we sorted it by the easy ones, the low-hanging fruit, so to say," he explains. That meant things like eliminating disposable toothbrush cups and switching from single-serve packets of jam and marmalade to bigger communal dispensers. The benefits were twofold, he says: "Lower costs, better for the environment."

Next came changes that involved some up-front investment, like switching to buying all of their energy from renewable sources and paying for all of their employees to use public transportation for free. They opted for LED bulbs and installed more water-saving showerheads.

"What is in front of us now is the next, biggest step, [which] is to change the supply chain," Winter says. This includes factors like buying local whenever possible and reducing the number of delivery stops or figuring out how to make an energy-intensive process like doing laundry more sustainable. These are the problems the hostel chain is tackling now.

Winter says that, in all honesty, a&o Hostels probably would have seen the same level of success even without its carbon-zero goals. "The payoff, I think, is [in] the longer run," he says, citing Gen Zs eco-consciousness and his belief that a growing number of people will care about sustainability moving forward.

But perhaps the most impactful thing is how these sustainability goals have impacted his workforce.

"What we really see is employee engagement," he says. "We have many people here in the company that wouldn't be with us without this purpose, without going this route, to zero. That's definitely something, to be attractive for some talents you'd like to have and keep them at the company."

—Em Cassel

Twisted X Global Brands

Prasad Reddy was shocked when he first saw a photo of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a massive collection of litter measuring almost 1.6 million square kilometers in the North Pacific Ocean.

The president and CEO of Twisted X Global Brands, a western footwear company, was immediately motivated to take action.

"I was saddened, shocked and abruptly aware that I wanted to do what I could to be better for our planet," he says.

Based in Decatur, Texas, Reddy and his team jumped into planning, establishing a partnership with a group in Taiwan to create ecoTWX™, an eco-fabric used to make various styles of shoes, including chukkas, work boots and slip-on loafers. It's spun from an average of 13 recycled plastic bottles salvaged from oceans and landfills. With this process, Twisted X has been able to clean up more than 7.6 million plastic bottles from the environment in just over 10 years.

"Sustainability isn't just a one-time effort," Reddy says. "It's a daily commitment ingrained in our company DNA and culture. We understand that true sustainability is an ongoing process requiring constant innovation."

Twisted X looks to nature for inspiration when it comes to using eco-friendly materials in its products. It uses natural materials such as merino wool, molasses, bamboo, algae and rice husk. As of 2022, every active shoe style has at least one sustainable element, which they discovered results in better footwear, Reddy says.

In addition to ecoTWX™, Twisted X created other materials using EVA foam waste from factory production, recycled P.E.T. fabric and recycled scrap leather that would otherwise end up in landfills.

Reddy is particularly proud of the company's Zero-X™ collection. Instead of using chemical adhesives, it's made with an interlocking, double-stitching system that eliminates 75% of the environmental issues often associated with creating traditional footwear, like scoring dust, debris and heating and cooling energy.

"When we were challenged and told that we had to have a little glue on the footbed and shoe lining, we kept trying and worked to ensure this no-glue shoe means no glue, not even one drop," he says.

In addition to creating sustainable products, Twisted X has been a carbon-neutral business since 2020 in its headquarters, global factories, distribution and shipping, offsetting thousands of tons of carbon dioxide from planting more than 517,000 trees in partnership with One Tree Planted.

Reddy says Twisted X will continue to improve materials, processes and collections.

"Sustainability is a constant, ongoing process for us," he says. "We don't feel there is a stop and start here."

—Kristen Tribe

Blueland

Blueland cofounder and CEO Sarah Paiji Yoo's journey to helping eliminate more than a billion plastic cleaning bottles from landfills and oceans started at home. After giving birth to her first child, the former founder of fashion and beauty companies began researching not only the best baby formula but also the cleanliness of New York City's water supply. She was shocked that microplastics—small plastic particles created by single-use plastic breaking down—had infiltrated our water, food and even the human body.

The discovery sent Paiji Yoo on a zero-waste mission in her own home—yes, even with a newborn—but she also recognized that her single household would only make a small impact on plastic consumption. She could only truly enact change at scale.

When creating Blueland, she and cofounder John Mascari had a name, but not a product. Their mission was to reduce single-use plastic consumption—and remains so even after launching more than 10 home products, from dish to hand soap, and landing the products in big-name retailers such as Target and Costco. Paiji Yoo credits hiring Chief Innovation Officer Syed Naqvi—with whom she appeared on *Shark Tank* in 2019—as a key milestone. He helped create the then-non-existent cleaning tablets for refillable containers. "As you can imagine, there were a lot of naysayers," Paiji Yoo recalls.

Blueland went to almost a dozen contract manufacturers who simply didn't have the equipment or capacity to make a dry concentrate product. The mission drove Blueland's continued search for manufacturing partners. It now holds more than 40 patents and is responsible for bringing refillable cleaning products in the tablet format to market.

"I believe so much of the entrepreneurship journey is just taking that next natural step forward," Paiji Yoo says. "There isn't a road map, right? And that's why you're an entrepreneur, right? You're doing something that may not have been done ever for the first time, but I think that that's OK. I think everything is done for the first time at some point, and it can be you.... You don't have to sprint a marathon all at once. Just take it sort of step by step, day by day."

Beyond saving single-use plastic bottles, the company also estimates it has diverted nearly 13 million square feet of packaging from landfills. It has achieved these benchmarks both via consumers choosing its products and thoughtful business operations. The company holds more than seven sustainability-minded certifications, including being a Certified B Corporation, and has been carbon neutral since 2020.

"There are many ways for us to have an impact.... One is consumer-facing and trying to encourage [and] inspire more sustainable behaviors. But we also think, arguably, a larger lever and way to have [an] impact is your business," Paiji Yoo says.

These days, Paiji Yoo's son, who inspired Blueland, speaks proudly about his mom's work and even pitched scents for the company's holiday products this year. "[He's] there for all of the wins and celebrations," she says.

—Ashley M. Biggers

Photo from GROUNDed by Blueland.com

Ashley M. Biggers
Ashley M. Biggers is an award-winning freelance journalist based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her writing has appeared in many publications, including US News and World Report, Travel + Leisure, Conde Nast Traveler, and Self.

Kristen Tribe
Kristen Tribe is the special projects editor forSUCCESS+magazine and other digital projects at SUCCESS®.

Em Cassel
Cassel is a Minneapolis-based writer and editor, a co-owner of Racket MN, and a VHS collector.

Tess Lopez
Lopez is the digital managing editor for SUCCESS magazine.

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