Nest and Ecopsis Tackle Wastewater Solutions for Fashion Brands

Nest partnered with Ecopsis to develop a globally applicable solution for wastewater management, designed for small workshop production.

By Tracey Greenstein on December 12, 2017

Sara Otto

Nest, a nonprofit organization that builds global handworker economies, held its Third Annual Handworker Leadership Summit at the United Nations last week. The summit is a multi-stakeholder forum hosted by Nest and the Ethical Fashion Initiative.
In its session titled, “Designing outside of silos: Innovating a new global solution for responsible wastewater management,” panelists discussed differing wastewater solutions currently in practice by textile brands in the fashion industry. The solutions combat the effects of toxicity from released wastewater yielded by the textile dyeing process.

Nest partnered with Ecopsis, a Swiss consulting firm that specializes in the challenges of sanitation projects, to develop the first-ever globally applicable and affordable solution for wastewater management designed for small workshop production. Over a two-year period, Nest and Ecopsis conducted extensive testing, research and analyzed ten artisan brands on the ground in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and California to examine the businesses’ current technologies in wastewater management and their engagement with local engineers.

Its solution will be implemented via a “phased approach,” which primarily helps artisans select and build the right technology within their budget to treat wastewater. In its second phase, the tool will improve the selected system over time, incrementally. And ancillary services such as educational tools will complement the initiative, which is scheduled to pilot in various locations in 2018. The project is still under development.

Sara Otto, the director of artisan compliance and programming at Nest, said the “improper treatment of wastewater from apparel and home goods production has long been a social and environmental issue globally.” Otto continued, “There still remains a gap in creating effective and relevant solutions for artisan businesses,” and that for artisans seeking wastewater solutions, “the collaboration between artisan businesses and brands is absolutely necessary.”
The panel was moderated by Becca Prowda, the director of community affairs at Levi Strauss and Co. Speakers and panelists included: Raihan Ali, the artisan business leader at Thanapara Swallows; Prakash Amatya, artisan business leader at Handmade Water; Miriam Dym, artisan business leader at Dym California Textiles; Amédé Ferré, engineer at Ecopsis; Sarah Hayes, senior material research and innovation manager at Patagonia; Sara Otto, of Nest and Pradeep Sinha, artisan business leader at Bodhi.
The main issue, Ferré said, is helping artisan brands select the right technology for different contexts and that currently “there is no one-size-fits-all technology.” Ecopsis identified three hindrances that inhibit development of wastewater solutions across the board: a low demand or interest in the artisan community to invest in wastewater systems, due to a lack of education and awareness of health-associated risks; total absence of enforcement from local regulation, in which brands cannot meet established standards financially or otherwise and that artisans’ suppliers offer technologies that cannot be sustained over time.

Pradeep Sinha said that “When we started our [block printing] business many years ago, there were really no regulations in place. And then suddenly regulations came in and in one night we became criminals, [because] we were throwing wastewater where we weren’t supposed to.” Instead of throwing contaminated water down the drain, Sinha recycles it completely. Sinha’s solution, which is located in the middle of his courtyard, “allows nature to do it” through a constructed wetland with treated soil, billions of chemical eating microbes and water lilies that transport and filter the water through multiple stages to significantly enhance its quality. “We have been a very frugal company,” he said. “We don’t waste anything.”

And Miriam Dym, a California-based textile block print artist, said that she too suffers from the lack of a cohesive wastewater solution, even with greater access to education and resources. Nest worked with Dym to create an open-source project as part of her grant with the organization to fund a wastewater solution for her business. “This problem is completely invisible where I live,” she said. “We are the people [where I live] that can afford to really fix it and somehow it needs to be more visible and it needs to be palpable.”