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Living A More Sustainable Lifestyle: Brand Recommendations and Product Reviews

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

**Living A More Sustainable Lifestyle: Brand Recommendations and Product
Reviews**

A Capstone Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Honors

Department Of

Management

By

Alison Kramer

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Abstract:

While current studies are done on individual products, there isn't a consolidated paper for consumers to use when purchasing everyday items. Consumers don't have time to do research on things they buy weekly or even monthly. To understand what products are truly sustainable and good for the environment, consumers would have to spend hours researching what products or materials are better than what they currently buy. This paper outlines a set of criteria that will help consumers make informed decisions when it comes to buying everyday products. Consumers can also find a list of product recommendations in this paper.

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Introduction

Living a more sustainable life shouldn't be difficult. Consumers deserve transparency when choosing products when it comes to ingredients, packaging, operations, etc. This book explores companies that provide an alternative to single-use products or are products we use every day that are made sustainably.

How To Use This Book

This book first presents the environmental issues with most products that we buy regularly. It then introduces a lifestyle to help create less waste, choose products that are better for our health, and save us money in the future. During the research process of understanding what the current problems are with products that we purchase, criteria were created to find brands and products that are made more sustainably conscious. This criterion was used to test products from different brands to provide a recommendation. These recommendations include product reviews on how the product worked and the price related to typical products that are purchased regularly. In Appendix A, websites and apps are referenced to help make smart decisions when looking at different brands that are not recommended specifically in this book. Resources on where to find bulk shopping and recycling in your state can also be found in Appendix A. Appendix B shows different services for consumers to be more sustainable in their daily lives.

The Problem With...

Plastic

Plastic is flexible, strong, and durable which means it never breaks down (Gale, 2020, P. 62). It photodegrades, meaning it breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces until it enters the ocean and our food chain (Gale, 2020; Kellogg, 2019). They enter the food chain through the fish we eat and bottled water. One out of three fish that are caught today will contain plastic. (Gale 2020). 94% of bottled water contains these microplastics (Kellogg 2019). If you don't directly consume microplastics through bottled water or fish, the plastic containers that you cook food in can leach harmful substances into your food. They can cause many major medical issues that can be detrimental to your health, such as hyperactivity, infertility in males, cancer, and neurological conditions (Su, 2018).

Recycling

Scientists predict that almost half of all plastic produced for consumption is considered single-use plastic (Gale, 2020, p. 61). That means we use it once and it ends up in the landfill to break down into microplastics and enter our food chain. Recycling plastic is a great start to responsible consumption; however, it is not enough. There is still too much consumption, and too much recycling to process. Most of our recycling in America is sent to China to be further processed. Unfortunately, China will only process the recycling if it has less than 1% contamination. The average contamination in U.S. recycling is 4%. On average only 9% of all plastic is recycled (Kellogg, 2019). In 2020, the leading waste management company in the United States, Waste Management, was able to recycle 13.5% of the materials they picked up which is slightly up from 12.9% in 2019. However, recycling is not enough, the other 86.5% of recycling consumers thought was headed to be recycled ended up in landfills (Recycling: Wm sustainability report)

Compostable and Biodegradable Products

Most products that are marketed as compostable and biodegradable are only compostable at industrial composting facilities. These products react the way regular plastics do when they end up in a landfill. Even worse, when they end up in the recycling, they can lead to entire batches being thrown away (Gale, 2020, p. 63). They also take more water, energy, and toxic chemicals to produce (Why Compostables and bioplastics aren't the answer - upstream: Sparking innovative solutions to plastic pollution)

Linear vs Circular Economy

“We live in a convenience-based society where we often believe that all our problems can be solved with cheap, disposable products destined for the landfill” (Kellogg, 2019, Introduction). This quote describes the linear economy that we live in today.

Linear

In this economy, take-make-dispose is the main focus for products. Raw materials are converted into products that are used for a short amount of time and then disposed of as waste. Selling as many products as possible is the way value is created in this type of economy (Szymanski et al., 2021). This is what we have always done in our current economy.

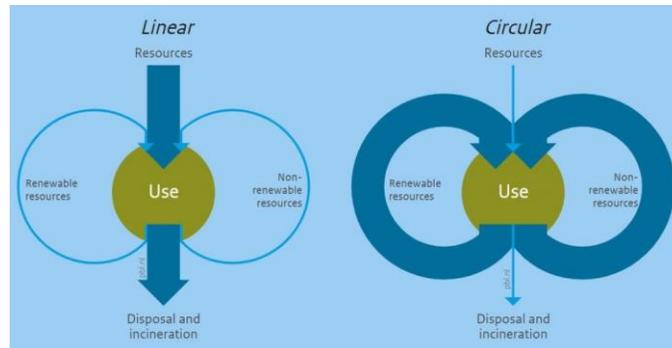


Figure 1. Rood T. and Hanemaaijer A., 2017, Opportunities for a circular economy. PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, The Hague, accessed 04/10/2022 at [https://themasites.pbl.nl/o/circular-economy/.](https://themasites.pbl.nl/o/circular-economy/)

Circular

The previous problems discussed are associated with a linear economy versus a circular economy. In this type of economy, a better way to think about the economy is through a circular economy. In this economy, products are made to last and be reused many times. By creating products with the end goal of reusing, recycling, and reducing products instead of using them for a short amount of time and disposing of them, we can create a more sustainable world. To make this model work, all levels of production and consumption (micro, meso, and macro levels) need to work diligently to create a circular economy (Kirchherr et al. 2017).

Zero-Waste Lifestyle

Zero-Waste Lifestyle

The Zero-waste movement encourages people to not only reduce their waste production going to the landfill but also minimize their recycling (Gale, 2020, p. 35). The ultimate goal is to send zero waste to the landfill. To do this we reduce what we need, reuse what we can, send minimal amounts on recycling, and compost whatever is left. This framework sets you up to reduce your impact as much as you can (Kellogg, 2019). The benefits of living a zero-waste lifestyle include saving money, simplifying your life, consuming consciously, being healthier, feeling empowered, and having more time for what matters (Su, 2018).

Waste Hierarchy *adapted from The Sustainable(ish) Living Guide by Jen Gale*

This waste hierarchy below aids in achieving a zero-waste lifestyle. When purchasing items, consumers need to run through this hierarchy to make a decision. First, do they need the product or is it just on sale? Refusing the product is the best way to not buy things impulsively. Similar to refusing something, reduce the amount you bring into your home. The next three deal with what you do with the product after you are done using it for its intended purpose; try reusing it for something else, rehoming it to a friend who can use it, or repairing it to begin using it again. After exhausting all of these options, you should recycle the item if you can, and finally, if you absolutely cannot recycle it, throw it away to rot in the landfill for hundreds of years.

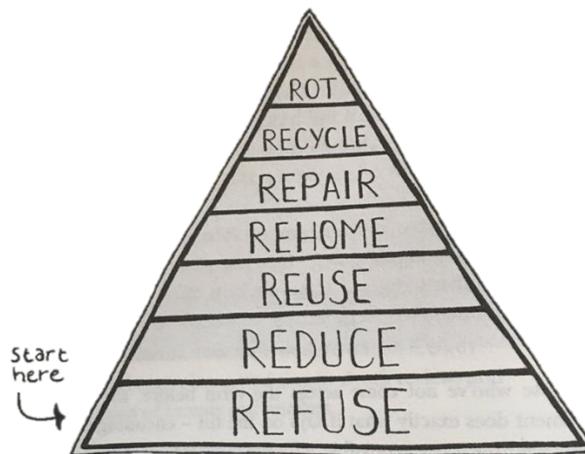


Figure 2. Gale. (2020). The sustainable(ish) living guide: everything you need to know to make small changes that make a big difference. Green Tree.

Criteria for Selection and Testing

Brand Selection Criteria

When selecting different brands to purchase, the following criteria were used to determine if the brand met the values of a sustainably conscious consumer. In Appendix C, you can see how each of these criteria was assessed and how each brand used in testing was rated.

Shipping

Carbon Emissions – The company must ship their packages by offsetting the carbon emissions or be working to reduce their emissions with the end goal of being carbon emission neutral.

Community Engagement

Programs that support locals – The company should have programs in place to help support the community they are in.

Fair wages – Companies must pay their workers a fair, living wage.

Materials and Ingredients

No palm oil can be used in the products and organic or recycled materials are highly respected in this category.

Certifications

There are many certifications that businesses can receive. The main ones that were used in this process to find sustainable brands are B-corps, 1% for the planet, and Cradle to Cradle. These certifications are outlined below and were highly valued when choosing brands to purchase from.

B-corps. This certification requires businesses to score 80 or higher on their impact assessment, make a legal commitment to account for all stakeholders and not just shareholders, and show transparency in their performance on B Lab's website.

The assessment includes questions on 6 different areas: governance, workers, community, environment, customers, and disclosure questions. The governance questions focus on ways the company's practices follow the mission, ethics, accountability, and transparency. The questions in the worker section focus on the employee's financial, physical, professional, and social well-being. Questions in the community section focus on how the company can contribute to the economic and social well-being of the community around them. The environment section helps improve the overall environmental stewardship. Questions in the customer section help improve the value the company creates for the customers. The disclosure questions ask any questions that may have been missed in one of the other sections (*B Lab Global Site*).

1% for the planet. 1% of total gross sales are donated to approved nonprofit partners. ½ of the total 1% donated can come in volunteer hours from employees, but at least 50% must be in the form of monetary donations (*1% for the planet*).

Cradle to Cradle. The certification requires products to be assessed using material reuse, renewable energy and carbon management, material health, social fairness, and water stewardship. These five categories are rated using a basic to platinum scale and help find more sustainable products to help with a more circular model (*Cradle to Cradle Products Innovation Institute*).

Price

The price of each product should be relatively similar to the traditional product it is replacing. If the product is more than the traditional product, in the long run, it should end up being similar in price or cheaper than the traditional product.

While these are the main criterion that was used when choosing brands, other factors came up that made a brand worthy of testing. These things include a company that used sustainable materials or ingredients to replace something that is single use. While this brand may not have any certifications that were previously discussed, by purchasing this product you are supporting the zero-waste lifestyle.

Product Testing Criteria

Packaging/Shipping

Material – Compostable or recyclable material is used. Shipping containers made from recycled materials are a bonus.

Waste – All shipping is zero-waste and plastic-free.

Product Efficacy

Functionality – The function of the product is the same as the single-use alternatives. For example, reusable cotton swabs should function the same as traditional cotton swabs.

Quality – The quality of the product must meet the same standards as their traditional product and be able to last for long-term use to justify a higher cost.

Brands I recommend/different products with reviews

Last Object

Danish manufacturing company that produces alternatives to single-use products like reusable Kleenex and cotton swabs.

Packaging: Brown paper to keep from shaking, cardboard box, cardboard boxes on all products.

Products I tested:

Q-Tips – Does not soak up any water from ears, still testing this one out, not convinced just yet.



Kleenex Box – Box has one side for dirty tissues and clean tissues on the other side. These wash well with towels and are great for days when you are sick.



Overall Recommendation: The Kleenex replacements are worth the money and will save you during cold season. The Q-tips are something that is a personal preference, and I would look into compostable options instead. They don't function like regular cotton swabs and leave my ears with water in them.

Baymel

All natural personal care items made with bee products.

Packaging: Cardboard boxes with plastic wrap on each bar.

Products I tested:

Honey and Oatmeal Soap – This product is very soft compared to regular bar soap. However, after getting used to the differences the product works well and leaves your skin feeling very smooth.



Beeswax Lip Balm – This product is thick but works great. It would be great for those chapped winter lips.

Overall Recommendation: I loved these products and think they support a great company.

Ethique

Plant-based hair and body bars and cleaning products.

Packaging: Cardboard boxes, lots of extra space. Products tend to shake making them get the product in the box.

Products I tested:

Dish Soap – Takes a while to fully mix in with water, pricey for a single jar amount.

Hand Soap – Takes a while to fully mix in with water, pricey for a single jar amount.

Multipurpose Spray – Takes a while to fully mix in with water, pricey for a single jar amount.

Face Wash – Suds like any other face wash feels clean after using it and lasts a long time.

Face Lotion – Takes time to get used to, could slightly feel greasy to the touch. Soaks into the skin after a few minutes and leaves you moisturized.

Shampoo – Suds extremely well, leaves hair feeling clean.



Conditioner – Takes time to get used to. Hard to swipe onto the hair at first. If you warm it up in your hands and then wipe it onto the hair it works a lot better.

Shaving Cream – A little product goes a long way with this bar. If you use too much the product is very clumpy and you won't get a great shave.

Lip Balm – Pricey but works well.

Shower Storage – Works well keeping the bars dry, doesn't last forever which is a downside.

Overall Recommendation: I would stick to the personal care items from this brand and stay away from the household cleaning products. The cleaning products work the same as many of the other sustainable brands but are more expensive. The personal care items are phenomenal and all function as they should.

Blueland

An eco-friendly cleaning product company.

Packaging: Cardboard box, unnecessary cardboard boxes inside separating the products.

Products I tested:

Hand Soap – Less than 2 dollars for a refill and the soap is foamy and leaves hands feeling clean.



Window Cleaner – Works great, leaves some streaks similar to Windex. I've found if you run a duster over the dry window, the streaks disappear.

Multipurpose Spray – Cleans grease in seconds, great quality product that works on the toughest of messes.

Laundry Detergent Tablets – Very crumbly, cleans clothes but not super impressed.



Oxi Booster Powder – a great addition to add with workout clothes.

Dishwasher Tablets – Cleans dishes but not tough stuck-on food, tablets come partially broken.

Dryer Balls – Dries clothes in a fraction of the time, however, doesn't collect pet hair from clothes and leaves some clothes staticky.



Toilet Cleaner – Works great, tablets are large and crumbly similar to other tablets from this company. Leaves the toilet looking clean.



Overall Recommendation: I recommend purchasing the cleaning tablets for soap and sprays. These are cost-effective and work great. I would stay away from the laundry and dishwasher tablets because they are less effective than other sustainable options I have found.

CleanCult

A powerful cleaning company that uses real ingredients in its products.

Packaging: Great sturdy box that can be reused, paper packaging that helps keep glass items secure.

Products I tested:

Stain Stick – Works great on stains, I wonder how long the product will last compared to a spray stain remover.

Glass Hand Pump – High quality, should last a very long time if properly cleaned between refills.

Glass Spray Bottle – First bottle leaks product out of the nozzle and will need to be retested on a new bottle.

Foaming Hand Soap – This product worked similar to other sustainable hand soaps I purchased. The caps are made out of plants and the container is all home compostable!



Overall Recommendation: This company has all-around great alternatives and I would recommend purchasing any of the products from this company.

Droppps

Laundry and dishwasher pods that are made with natural ingredients.

Packaging: Brown boxes, allows you to store the pods in them.

Products I tested:

Dishwasher Pods – Works just like the old cascade pods I use to buy in the plastic package.

Detergent Pods – Work amazing on clothes, similar to Tide pods.

Fabric Softener Pods – Didn't notice a difference when using this product. I would skip it and use vinegar instead.

Oxi Boost Pods – Great addition to the detergent, gets smelly gym clothes clean and gets rid of armpit stains.

Overall Recommendation: I love all of these products and would recommend any of them to everyone. They work just as well as tide pods or cascade pods. The one product I would stay away from is the fabric softener pods.

Marley's Monsters

Women-owned business in Oregon that provides reusable fabric alternatives to many single-use and paper products.

Packaging: Cardboard box with zero extra space in the box.

Products I tested:

Unpaper Towels – Soaks up well, wouldn't use the light colors on liquids that will stain. Need to test out with stain remover.



Cloth Napkins – Great alternative to single-use napkins, I love them!



Mop Pads – These work just like the regular single-use options. They clean up well with a load of towels in the washing machine.

Coffee Filters – Used in a pour-over system and worked great. The cleaning process is strange, they tell you to store in water in the fridge. I rinse mine clean and store it with my coffee. They recommend boiling every so often.

Bowl Covers – This product works great for a quick storage in the fridge overnight or a pan of brownies to cool off.



Overall Recommendation: The products that I tried out from this brand are all great. They replace single-use alternatives and wash nicely in the washing machine. I'm curious to see how long they last when washed weekly.

Stasher

Platinum-grade silicon bags that are endlessly reusable.

Packaging: 2 brown paper bags seemed a bit excessive, stickers on each bag.

Products I tested:

Plastic Bags – Does not completely get a strong seal, made cheese dry out. Other food works great in these products.



Overall Recommendation: I recommend these bags to anyone. They are easy to clean and dry quickly for storage. Different foods work better in these bags than others, so it takes some time to understand which foods to keep here and which to keep in a glass container.

Stojo

Collapsible reusables that make it easier to bring coffee and lunch from home.

Packaging: Cardboard box and paper wrapper.

Products I tested:

Food Storage Containers – Work great, difficulty closing the lid when there is food that could spill out.



Coffee Mug – Completely leakproof which is a plus when you're done drinking your coffee and throw it in your purse.



Overall Recommendation: These are great for commuters who want to take their lunch or coffee to work and then have more room in their bags on the way home. These products are leakproof and get smaller to save space.

UKonserve

Non-toxic and long-lasting metal containers with a sustainable silicon lid option.

Packaging: Brown cardboard boxes with paper wrapped around the outside of containers.

Products I tested:

Food Storage Containers – These are long-lasting and perfect to take for lunch. The metal containers do scratch slightly so do not store them inside of each other.



Overall Recommendation: These containers work great and are around the same price as typical food containers. The packaging on these containers is questionable as to whether or not they are recyclable or compostable. But the product itself is a great alternative to plastic containers. Unfortunately, these cannot be used in the microwave but can be used to store other food.

Zungleboo

Provides eco-friendly tableware made from corn and bamboo.

Packaging: Cardboard box, sheets in between.

Products I tested:

Plates – Scratch when cutting on them, over time they may chip and leave part of the plate in food.

Bowls – Work great and are classy looking.



Overall recommendation: These plates and bowls are not my favorite alternative to paper plates. Knives leave marks on the plates. They can't be put in the dishwasher on heat dry, but I did test them out and they were fine. I'm not sure how long they will last. While the materials are great, the product itself isn't the best alternative to paper plates.

Athleta

A clothing brand that offers a wide range of clothing from workwear to cozy styles.

Packaging: typical plastic bags, not recyclable.

Products I tested:

Outbound Tee – Stretchy, good quality top

Brooklyn Ankle Pant – Fit great, high-quality material.

Overall Recommendation: These products are of great quality but more expensive than most consumers might want to pay to be more sustainable.

United by Blue

A sustainable clothing brand that is working to create innovative alternatives for clothing. For example, buttons made out of nuts.

Packaging: 2 paper bags, paper inside could cut down on.

Products I tested:

Organic Corduroy Shirt – Thinner than expected for the price.

Overall Recommendation: While the product was not as high of quality as I expected with the price, I think the product is justified with the qualities of the brand and materials they use in their product.

Rothy's

Shoe and bag manufacturers that are innovative and sustainable designed out of recycled plastic bottles.

Packaging: Cardboard box and paper filling.

Products I tested:

Shoes – Great quality, sizing is slightly off, 9.5 way too big, 9 a little snug.



Overall Recommendation: These take a few days to fit your feet and start to be more comfortable. They did give me slight blisters on the first few days of wearing them but after that, they are extremely comfortable, durable, and clean well in the washing machine.

Appendices:

Appendix A: Resources for testing brands

Yuka – This allows you to scan food and personal care products and see their impact on your health. Food products are evaluated using nutritional quality, the presence of additives, and organic aspects of the product. Cosmetic products are evaluated based on the risk level associated with each ingredient.

How Good – Rates products on sustainability, wholesomeness, and honesty using growing guidelines, processing practices, and company conduct. Environmentally friendly products, minimally processed, and ethically produced will receive high scores from this app.

Littleless.com – Helps find bulk stores and local compost areas around the United States.

Fairify.io – Brands are rated on ambition, transparency, planet, people, and animals. Brands that are rated A or B are recommended as great sustainable brands to support. Brands rated C or lower are not recommended as they have lots of steps to take before being considered sustainable.

Goodonyou.eco – Brands are rated based on their commitment to do better for the planet, people, and animals. These choices lead to a sustainable future for fashion. Brands need to be transparent about how they treat their workers, use resources, contribute to waste management, policies to address energy use and carbon emissions, and how to trace their animal products. In addition to brand ratings, they also include articles and expertise on ethical and sustainable fashion.

Appendix B: Sustainable Services

<https://trashless.com/icepackgiveback-19708> - picks up ice packs (10 minimum) that you get from online grocery services and reuses them

Appendix C: Brands Testing Criteria

*See Appendix D for website Links

*See below for table ratings

Brand	Is carbon Neutral?	Community Programs*	Materials	B-Corp	1% for the Planet	Cradle to Cradle	Price Range*	Other Notes
Athleta		1	Some recycled fabrics	X			\$\$\$	
Blueland	X	1	Cradle-to-cradle certified	X		X	\$	
CleanCult	X	1	Biodegradable ingredients				\$	Free recycling program
Dropps	X	1	EPA safer choice				\$	
Ethique	X	3	Sustainably produced and biodegradable ingredients, no health risks associated, no palm oil, and cruelty-free and vegan	X			\$	2% of sales to charity, a living wage, certified palm oil-free
Last Object		1	100% organic cotton, ~35% of products are from recycled materials	Pending			\$\$	
Marley's Monsters		1	Donate scraps and reuse what they can for their products				\$\$	BRING rethink certified
Native		1	No aluminum				\$\$\$	Extremely transparent
Nisolo	X	2	Leather goods built to last, post-consumer recycled PET, upcycle brass and scrap metal into jewelry	X			\$\$\$	Created The Minimum Standard for fashion brands to follow to be more sustainable
Rothy's	Working towards (2023)	1	Shoes/bags are made of plastic water bottles and algae-based foam				\$\$\$	We will achieve zero-waste next year
Stasher		2	Platinum silicone that won't leach chemical toxins				\$\$	Free repurpose program if bags ever break
Stojo		2	Material is FDA and LFGB Platinum Certified, actively seeking ways to use recycled components				\$	
UKonserve		3	Platinum and food-grade silicon tested by CPSIA-accredited independent labs	X	X		\$	
United by Blue		3	Buttons made from nuts, recycled polyester, organic cotton, and hemp	X			\$\$\$	4.2 million pounds of trash removed
Zungleboo		1	Made from corn and bamboo with no melamine binders				\$\$	

Community Programs

- 1 - No programs currently
- 2 – Mediocre programs, could be better
- 3 – Great programs that are giving back

Price Range (compared to traditional products)

- \$ - Cheaper or similar priced
- \$\$ - More expensive but less expensive in the long-term
- \$\$\$ - More expensive

Appendix D: Brand Links to Websites

[Athleta](#)

[Baymel](#)

[Blueland](#)

[CleanCult](#)

[Droppps](#)

[Ethique](#)

[Last Object](#)

[Marley's Monsters](#)

[Native](#)

[Nisolo](#)

[Rothy's](#)

[Stasher](#)

[Stojo](#)

[UKonserve](#)

[United by Blue](#)

[Zungleboo](#)

[Zero Waste Store](#) – This site offers many of the brands above in one place. They even tell you what the end of life is for most products!

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