

## Made-Somewhere-Else



I visited my local national park on its recent centennial while wearing a Chinese made jacket, carrying a pack that came from Vietnam and walking in Italian made shoes. Take note, my socks were proudly made in the USA.

The American outdoor industry has an elephant in the room. It is simply this; every aspect of the gear and apparel the industry sells is shaped by a remote and complex supply chain based entirely overseas.

The strict timing of the current production model dictates that retailers write what is known as 'preseasons' – purchase orders written for goods intended to be sold almost a year later, a laughable relic in this just-in-time world. Imagine buying down jackets for next winter when you haven't had this winter yet. And since most brands' fabric-color-design choices change every year, traditional retailers find themselves unable to roll over unsold product from a previous season and simply fill-in sizes. To

stay competitive, old stock is put on clearance and pushed into a robust off-price market.

Minimum Order Quantity, or "MOQ" in industry speak, fuels the cycle in two ways. Since brands are compelled to relentlessly change color palettes and product design each season, the MOQs for new textile production must be reached while delivering the same formulaic gross margin for all the players downstream. This puts huge pressure on textile development and supply. Foreign sewing factory MOQ's also increase as these businesses get bigger and have more negotiating leverage. The brand's sourcing teams are constantly faced with shifting production of modest quantity styles to lower cost suppliers in order to match last year's price.

Outdoor product sourcing in many ways has become a house of cards.

The American consumer clearly wants diversity and technology and is quickly coming around

to the concepts of fair-trade and sustainability. The outdoor product reality however is decidedly different. Established production includes mass manufacturing on the other side of the planet, often in countries that offer no political, personal or information rights, using low-cost textiles from thousands of miles away, and then loading the goods onto smoke-belching freighters and shipping it to our shores where it is handled and shipped again and again, eventually showing up in a specific location and put out for sale on a specific date. The facts are way out of step with our shared image of a modern, thoughtful and active lifestyle. That's the pachyderm in the parlor.

Making product here solves many of these issues. Production cycles are shortened, environmental laws are followed, the labor dollars stay close to home, there is less waste and glut, and the entire enterprise supports an open and free society. American made product is a better for

ourselves, our communities, and the planet.

Not long ago when you bought a shirt from J.C. Penney or Sears or even Kmart, that retailer had physically made the shirt. J.C. Penney may not have owned the sewing machines, however, a Penney's subsidiary company likely did and operated manufacturing plants that employed skilled sewers and cutters and finishers. This was the cultural environment – "walking the talk" it was called – that fostered the original outdoor brands; Holubar, The North Face, Trailwise and even REI actually manufactured the gear they sold. In those days if an avid outdoorsperson owned a TNF jacket, the odds were pretty good that they had purchased it directly from the Berkeley factory. The companies' product was a translation between the people they served and the environment they loved.

Maybe we are ready for that kind of messy and satisfying combination again. It will take courage for companies, and an industry, to put people back into the product-to-profit math, but I have a feeling that early adopters of this construct will be rewarded with fierce loyalty. The winds of change are blowing and hopefully it won't be too many more birthdays before our national parks are full of happy campers outfitted in American made clothing and gear. It will be to the benefit of us all. ●

Disclaimer: Mr. Gray's kids increasingly describe him as 'Old Stock' and are starting to believe that maybe it's time for him to be put 'on clearance.' His opinions are not necessarily shared by the publisher of this publication, or anyone else with an Amazon account.