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Wool in a Digital Age
Telling wool’s timeless story at the IWTO Congress

British Wools Chair Ian Buchanan and CEO Joe Farren with Dalesbred sheep at the IWTO Congress

BRUSSELS, 18 MAY 2017 – Wool has a unique contribution to make to the sustainability of interiors, lifestyle and fashion.

But how can this message be communicated to a wider, increasingly receptive, and digitally-savvy audience?

The Congress of the International Wool Textile Organisation, held 3-5 May in the United Kingdom, took on this timely but challenging theme.

While the explosive growth of digital media has led to amazing new ways to tell stories, keynote speaker the Rt Hon Brian Wilson had a simple answer:

‘Stick to first principles: quality and integrity,’ the Harris Tweed Hebrides Chairman advised delegates.

Attended by 249 delegates from around the world, the 86th annual IWTO Congress took place in Harrogate, a spa town in the north of England’s home of the textile trade.

The 25+ speakers and panelists included GQ’s Fashion Director and ‘Style Shrink’ Robert Johnston, who along with Premiere Vision’s Camille Serain and The Woolmark Company’s Damien Madden, tackled the theme of Wool in a Digital Age, exploring the effects of digitalisation on wool textile sales and marketing.
Representatives from brands Benetton, Patagonia and Devold shared their experiences in using wool as a key ingredient in their brands, as further sessions explored market trends, British wool farming, wool sustainability, wool in interiors, and results of research on the therapeutic use of superfine wool base layers as a treatment for eczema, which is leading to the development of a medical specification. ‘We were well pleased with the global attendance at the Congress and the very high level of the presentations over the three days in Harrogate,’ said IWTO President Peter Ackroyd.

Overcoming the Monster of Fast Fashion

Wool’s transition into niche markets is, said IWTO President Peter Ackroyd, a blueprint for the other noble fibres and similar industries around the world:

‘Globalisation offers producers of semi manufactured goods such as yarns and fabrics an ideal opportunity to allow perception, performance and provenance to triumph over price,’ Mr Ackroyd said in his opening remarks.

Today, more than forty wool textile manufacturers are thriving in the UK, from specialists in fine suiting and tweed, to weavers of some of the most technologically advanced worsted technical textiles.

While ‘bulk is no longer our game’, several speakers addressed the ‘modern mania for fast fashion’, as GQ’s Fashion Director ‘Style Shrink’ Robert Johnston put it.

‘Wool’s sustainability message will transform the industry from top to bottom,’ Mr Johnston predicted, noting that by 2020 half of the world’s workforce will be millennials who accept climate change as a given and have been empowered, having grown up with digital, to ‘talk back to brands’ about the ‘green credentials’ of their clothes.
As part of the update on the Campaign for Wool, delegates viewed the trailer of pop star-turned-cheese maker Alex James’ award-winning documentary ‘Slowing Down Fast Fashion,’ which shows how the huge demand for cheap clothing poses a long-term threat to the environment.

In the film, which was supported by the Campaign for Wool, James speaks with designers, activists, and high street brands to show that there is an ever-growing thirst for change as consumers start to look at clothes the way they look at food.

One delegate called it ‘essential viewing for all involved in the wool industry.’

Available on Amazon Prime, you can view the trailer at https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B01IDP9UYA

“We consider wool a socially responsible fibre” - Lorenzo Dovesi, COO Benetton Group

The Quest for Recognition

Whether through the efforts of IWTO’s Sustainable Practices Working Group – whose team is beginning to make marked progress in filling in data gaps and challenging the assumptions used by the ratings agencies, or through the work of brands such as Patagonia – whose desire for robust responsibility led to the creation of their own wool standard, the wool industry’s quest for recognition as environmentally and ethically sustainable was another key Congress theme.

While one of the issues is the lack of consumer understanding of ‘where things come from’, Patagonia Traceability Manager Nick Allen saw hope in the form of technology, which, he said, is changing things very quickly.
With a distinguished record of environmental philanthropy and investment, this leading outdoor apparel brand spoke to delegates of its ‘wool journey’ into animal welfare standards, which refused to bow to animal welfare NGOs.

‘What animal welfare NGOs want you to do is stop using animal fibres altogether,’ Mr Allen said. Instead, Patagonia shaped its PWS Animal Welfare Standard Benchmarking on expert recommendations, stakeholder feedback, and practices from 13 animal welfare standards including IWTO’s own guidelines (the latest edition of which is available from the IWTO website at http://www.iwto.org/resources/iwto-specifications-for-wool-sheep-welfare).

IWTO President Peter Ackroyd invited delegates to pledge support for the industry in its quest for recognition by signing the Dumfries Wool Declaration. Many key players in the industry responded and the total of pledges is now 350+.

The Declaration, which is endorsed by HRH The Prince of Wales, lists ten key principles which underlie the global wool industry, ranging from acknowledgement of wool’s natural attributes to assurance of the strictest standards of animal welfare under the national legislation of the world’s major wool growing countries.

For more information and to sign the Declaration, visit the Campaign for Wool website at http://www.campaignforwool.org/the-campaign/the-dumfries-house-declaration/

A major statement to the industry and the textile trade press about the significance of the Declaration will be made during Pitti Immagine Filati in June, Milano Unica in July, Première Vision in September and Intertextile in Shanghai in October, Mr Ackroyd informed delegates after the Congress.

Coming Full Circle

Rounding out the Congress programme, delegates heard stories where wool or the use of wool has come full circle, gaining the recognition it deserves:

Following years of the reign of the polyester fleece, wool is triumphing in active- and outdoor-wear, as delegates heard from Janne Strømmen, head of marketing for the Norwegian brand Devold (pictured below).

The brand's 100% wool Trollkyrkja anorak received a prestigious ISPO sustainability award earlier this year.

Lorenzo Dovesi, COO of Benetton Group, spoke of how his company is moving production back to Italy, even while other luxury brands are doing the opposite.

Clients are appreciating the move, Mr Dovesi said.

Dr Graham Ormondroyd of Bangor University presented evidence demonstrating wool’s positive impact on indoor air quality. His research, funded through the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme, found that wool can naturally absorb and retain pollutants in the air, such as formaldehyde.

Wool grower Lesley Prior described her success in raising Merino sheep in the United Kingdom, despite being told it couldn’t be done. Now a day does not go by, she said, without a new inquiry about her beautiful white 16.5-micron wool.

Professor Stephen Russell of the University of Leeds spoke on how the extensive recycling of wool clothing may lead to an improved sustainability rating of wool. This is right on trend with the most recent demands from retail for wool to fit into their closed loop manufacturing strategy. And wool has been doing it since 1910.
To be Continued

The next IWTO Congress is scheduled for 14-16 May 2018 in Hong Kong. To stay informed on the latest news on wool’s sustainability, health benefits, and more, visit www.iwto.org.

Janne Strømmen, head of marketing for sports-brand Devold, spoke about the brand’s 100% wool Trollkyrkja anorak, which received a prestigious ISPO sustainability award earlier this year.

About IWTO

With a worldwide membership encompassing the wool pipeline from farm to retail, the IWTO represents the interests of the wool textile trade at a global level. The recognized authority for standards in the industry, IWTO facilitates research, education and knowledge sharing in its mission to ensure a sustainable future for wool.

To learn more about IWTO and its activities, visit www.iwto.org.

Media Contact:
Jeannette Cook
Communications Manager
Tel.: +32 2 505 4012
Email: media@iwto.org