

Union of
Concerned
Researchers in
Fashion

Earth Day Open Letter to the Fashion Sector: Put Earth First in the wake of COVID-19

Dear friend and colleague in fashion,

Today, the 22nd of April 2020, is Earth Day.

We, the Board of the Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion (UCRF), write to you as a person, a fellow human and fashion professional and we are approaching you with an appeal to let the first step post COVID-19 to be a solid step for the Earth. We approach you directly, without the filter of a company or organisation. We appeal to you to use this moment to reimagine what life and fashion can be when we plan it to exist within the limits of the Earth and with the health of all humans and co-species as the central purpose.

The Corona pandemic has taught us with brutal honesty how fragile, unstable and unfit for purpose our social and economic systems are. It has revealed that the logic of economic growth is an ideology that is deeply flawed. What good is an economy that breaks down when we just buy the necessities for day-to-day life? Food, shelter and health are surely the foundation of any economic system. The ideology of the growth economy, configured towards profit and extraction of resources, does not sustain life on Earth.

Today, Earth Day, 22nd April 2020 marks only a few months since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet the fashion system is shattered. And yet many of us feel that this is a dress rehearsal for a still more existential threat: climate change, which the scientific community gives us less than a decade to address.

The fashion system, as it turns out, had no inbuilt margins, no structural resilience to absorb the stresses associated with a pandemic. Orders have been cancelled mid-production; individuals, communities and whole regions have lost their main source of livelihoods – livelihoods that were already insufficient to support living wages. People have died because they have been forced to work despite lack of protective equipment and in conditions where safe distancing was impossible. Employees of large fashion companies have been sacked or placed on furlough.

Yet, as we suffer, and some of us face life ahead without loved ones, the air is cleaner, and waters are clearer. In 1962, in her book *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson described an absence of birdsong associated with environmental degradation. In 2020, the northern hemisphere's spring is remarkably sonorous with birdsong, as the wheels of commerce quieten down.

The desire to return to a pre-COVID 19 'normal' as fast as possible' to 'limit the damage to economies' as reiterated by the International Monetary Fund is an understandable human reaction; it is also a knee-jerk reaction. Stridently, Greta Thunberg has remarked, 'There is a lot of talk about returning to "normal" after the COVID-19 outbreak. But normal was a crisis.'

Not only was the pre-COVID 19 normal a crisis; there is no normal to go back to, no previous health to recover. Production chains have been ruptured, people have been sacked, companies have gone bust, factories have closed. Whatever we do next has to be built afresh. Let's be sure that this effort is not one that simply recreates the normal that was a crisis. This is a threshold moment. A moment where we can fashion another system in which Earth, people and all species thrive, no matter what conditions and stresses (economic, biological, environmental or otherwise) are encountered.

This letter is an appeal to you, in whatever role you act in – perhaps as CEO, designer, journalist, stylist, model, merchandiser, shopkeeper, maker, educator, wearer of fashion – to make all new initiatives as brave and as far-reaching as possible. During the pandemic, we have seen that governments can find money when they feel they really need to and make fast decisions. We have seen that companies can adapt, and make protection equipment for the care sector instead of fashion items. We have begun to see what our local communities can offer.

Let's take inspiration from all of these efforts and harness this 'breaking away' from old ways. Let's work with and exceed the EU Green Recovery Call to Action. Let's take notes from Amsterdam who are rebuilding their city using the Doughnut Economics model. Let's use the [Earth Logic plan](#) for fashion which offers pathways that put Earth and all its species first instead of profit.

At this time when some of us are still in isolation and others are gingerly taking their first steps outside, an appetite for abundance is understandable. Yet the clearest and simplest action we all need to take, in our professional and personal lives, is living well with less. Only less resource use can lead us to life that flourishes within the Earth's natural limits.

We offer UCRF as a resource as we learn, make change and build resilient communities together. To support you at this extraordinary threshold moment, UCRF is running a monthly online discussion forum. The monthly conversations are for tracking transformation in action, for supporting each other to act on less; and to place Earth, people and all species first. You can sign up to participate [here](#).

Let this, the 50th anniversary of the first Earth Day, be a milestone forever celebrated, where businesses, governments, media and citizens said 'less is enough'. Now is the moment to build and celebrate living, working and thriving together within the limits of our beautiful Earth.

In solidarity,
UCRF board

The Union of Concerned Researchers of Fashion works for systems change in fashion. We are a united body of more than 200 specialists, working across 37 countries.

Next steps:
Sign up for UCRF's monthly online discussion forum [here](#).
Contact UCRF [here](#).