



## the great unwashed

TULLIA JACK BELIEVES DIRTY JEANS CAN HELP SAVE THE WORLD.

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**Imagine wearing the same pair of jeans every day for three months without washing them. Despite what you may think, tiny bacteria monsters aren't going to crawl up your legs and eat away at your soul. In fact, you might be doing something good for Old Mrs Nature, not to mention your water bill.**

This is Melbourne researcher Tullia Jack's theory. In between bouts of teaching sustainable fashion and founding the green-friendly event Spirit Of The Black Dress, she's been writing a thesis on a topic that is a little outside the detergent box: that getting dirty is good for the environment. All she needs to do is prove it.

"I want people to question why they are washing so much and think about the way that they consume resources in everyday life. We clean way too much, and it's mostly because of habit," Tullia says. Her idea is that if everyone could break the routine of washing their non-pongy clothes before needed, it might give a bigger thumbs up to nature than the current enviro-fashion trend of focusing purely on pricey eco materials and manufacture.

Taking to the streets with a clipboard and a big helping of audacity, Tullia conducted over 250 interviews with strangers to find out about the public's laundering tendencies. "The biggest reason behind washing was habit, the second reason was visible dirt and the third reason was odour," she explains. "And I don't think that habit is a good reason to wash." This is what's called 'inconspicuous consumption' and has a much greater impact than mindful decisions, Tullia says. You're more likely to think about sustainability in high-investment decisions like cars or houses, but in our daily lives, it's run by a mixture of habit and a desire to appear clean. Cleanliness is supposedly next to godliness, but for the environment, it can actually get a bit evil.

A part of Tullia's mission is to make people think that it's OK to be just a little bit dirtier. "The way that stains add to clothes isn't as bad as you think. People aren't judging you all the time. For example, if you have a spot on your dress, I'm probably not going to notice because I'm so caught up in my own life. And if everyone's expectations of cleanliness drop, then there is a huge implication for resources conservation," she says.

In order to demonstrate this though, she was going to need testers. Lots of them. Roping in a cohort of 32 participants ranging from 18 to 56 years old with various jobs and social positions, Tullia set them all on a trip to anti-laundering town. Trying to convince a bunch of unsuspecting individuals to wear the same item of attire for 90 days straight sounds hard enough, but going to a university board and telling them you want to write a thesis about dirty jeans takes even more bravado. Tullia had a nifty argument though.

"Lots of initiatives in sustainable fashion are in materials and design," she says, "but there's not much happening in the use phase. And according to fashion lifecycle analyses (which look at the environmental lifespan of a garment from creation to being thrown out), it looks like the use phase actually has the largest environmental impact, as it saps the most water and energy." Tullia's reasoning is that if you're washing your 100% organic hemp T-shirt every day, you're probably hurting the environment more than if you were wearing an outfit made from doggily cultivated crops, but only washing it once a month. Of course wearing ecologically friendly fabrics is a great step, but it's only part of the process. Tullia believes we've become so gung-ho about wearing environmentally kind fabrics that we're becoming lax on the most wasteful part of the process: the actual wearing.

Choosing a pair of jeans as the item of clothing to remain unwashed for the study was a pretty easy decision for Tullia, as "they're already on the cusp of social acceptance for not washing". The participants took this in their denim-clad stride, going to the extremes of continuing the experiment during trips to Morocco, through arthritic knee problems, and Tullia even wore her jeans for 36 hours straight on a train trip through China. Over time, her accomplices became dedicated to the cause.

Once the test was over, participants were interviewed to see how they were travelling. Tullia was met with a lot of results that she was expecting, like reduced general washing loads, but also a few facts that surprised her. "I found that people in relationships or families wash more, as people see washing as a sign of love, affection and caring," she says. "Hopefully people can show love without using resources, though!"

For those who shudder at the thought of germs and nasties making themselves at home in their denim, it turns out it's not such a problem. "Basically you can wear your jeans for a year and they

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will still have the same level of bacteria as they do at two weeks. They reach saturation point. Some people have differing levels of activity, different diets, or if you're like me then you're accident prone," Tullia sighs, pointing to a coffee smudge on her shirt, "but just trying to hold out as long as possible has a huge positive influence." She cites the fact that in the medieval times, royalty didn't wash anything – including themselves – for years and years. People living in the Himalayas also don't soak their clothes for fear of turning into human icicles. Of course there has to be a level of basic sanitation, in which Tullia wholeheartedly believes, but if these people have been able to sustain this level of living for yonks, then wearing a T-shirt twice in a row isn't going to give you the plague.

With a topic like this, Tullia's thesis has been getting a lot of attention. Strangers who've heard about the project come up to her in public bathrooms and offer to let her smell their jeans, and she even was given an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria. Showcasing the 32 pairs of (still) unwashed jeans, it turned into a quasi-performance piece, with people dressed in lab coats floating around with jars of coffee beans to cleanse the palate in between encouraging attendees to take sniffs. "Some people were disappointed because they thought the jeans would be really pongy, but they're not," Tullia laughs. "They smell a little like the person that was wearing them though. People were saying, 'That one smells a little like caramel. And that one smells like forest floor!'"

After the three months were up, nobody had fallen ill, nobody was shunned by their friends, and half of the once-reluctant testers actually wanted to continue the experiment. Not only that, but their new habit had transferred to other areas of their wardrobes, and friends and families had jumped on the anti-washing wagon too. "One participant was saying, 'This hasn't pushed me at all. This study has been boring. Let's do a year!' I think they were just happy to get out of the jeans!" she laughs. ❀