

In this research essay I investigated the textile waste options in my community, the global impact of these textiles and individual and province-wide actions that can reduce the amount of textiles going to landfills.

In my community of Caledonia the majority of textiles end up in the Municipal Waste Management Facility and are counted as part of the 400 kg of solid waste per person annually. Another option is to donate clothes to our local thrift store, Muriel's Closet. When tracing the path from Muriel's Closet to find where the textiles ended up, I was surprised. The unsold textiles sent to Value Village ultimately end up being sold to countries Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where there is currently a textile waste crisis. I found that clothing is compressed into 100 to 1000 lbs bales, wrapped in plastic, placed in water-tight containers, and shipped overseas. Even in a remote town of Caledonia, our clothing is ending up in landfills in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Individual efforts to divert end-of-life textiles from going to landfills is how change will begin to take place. It starts with buying clothes made to last long and supporting brands that understand the importance of recycling, repairing, and reusing is key. Having discussion and thinking about the environmental impacts of textiles being thrown out or donated to consider the best option will make a difference.

Nova Scotia has made strides towards becoming a more sustainable province, but work still needs to be done. To prevent the textiles from Nova Scotia to be redistributed into different countries a large-scale, local and provincially-funded textile recycling facility is the answer. It will turn the donated/discarded textiles into new materials or items that can then be sold back into Nova Scotia.

In conclusion, textile waste is a serious issue that affects the health of our world. This issue needs more public awareness so that individuals and governments make better, informed decisions with the purchasing and disposing of textiles.

## **The Textile Waste Problem in Caledonia and Nova Scotia**

Due to the growing popularity of cheaper clothes, fast fashion and online shopping, in the last two decades the amount of textile waste has skyrocketed globally. Statistics report that people today are buying three times as many clothes compared to the 1980s, and it is estimated that every second a garbage truck full of clothes is put into a landfill somewhere. A study in 2017 made it clear that Nova Scotia needs to do more when it comes to textile recycling; there is 30000 tonnes of textile waste a year in Nova Scotia and only 19 percent is recycled.

In my community of Caledonia, Queens County I have found that end-of-life textiles are disposed of in one of two ways. Residents can bag their end-of-life textiles, damaged or not, with the rest of their waste to be sent off to the Region of Queens Municipal Waste Facility. Once disposed of, the clothes can then take an upwards of 200 years to decompose. This amount of textile waste is unsorted and is therefore a part of the average 400 kg of solid waste per person a year in Nova Scotia.

What is considered the more environmentally friendly option is donating to our local thrift store and charity. Muriel's Closet in Caledonia is a non-profit fully run by volunteers where all the proceeds go to the local Community Food Resource Network (CFRN). CFRN combats food insecurity in our area through a weekly food bank and other food related programming and outreach. The problem is, as in any other small community, Muriel's Closet is receiving far more donated clothes than they can sell. Every Tuesday any unsold textiles are dropped off at Value Village. The coordinator of Muriel's Closet and CFRN, Diane Huskins, expressed dislike of donating to Value Village stating that it is a large for-profit business. Again, the lack of options limits her group to this or the landfill.

I didn't realize how right she was until I spoke with employees at Value Village and Frenchy's. I found that clothing is compressed into 100 to 1000 lbs bales, wrapped in plastic, placed in water-tight containers, and shipped overseas to sell in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. On the surface this seems to be a reasonable action, but what started out as a charity in the late 70s to 90s quickly turned into a vast, profitable business. Not only is it a business model that has taken over local industries but has become the main contributor to the textile crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asian. Countries like Burundi, Ghana, Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Angola, Tunisia, Uganda, India, and Pakistan buy the bulk of the textiles sent to Africa.

My research led me to a CBC interview (2022) of a Ugandan fashion designer, Bobby Kolade, who shed light on the severity of the situation. Kolade explained how Canada and the US have turned to sending clothes to Africa as "a waste disposal system." He clearly described the crisis African countries were in, with overwhelming amounts of textiles that endlessly damage their environment, economic standing, and culture.

In 2021, Kenya received over 900 million items of second-hand textiles, of which 20 to 50 percent were immediately disposed of on account of being oversized, stained, culturally inappropriate, or damaged in other ways. An increasing amount of textiles also end up in landfills and rivers. The textiles break down into microplastics that not only affect the quality of water but also the organisms living there and the soil health.

The importation of textiles also brought in the influence of western culture. Quantity over quality ideology has invaded these countries along with over-consumption and fast fashion. Kolade remarks what trying to upstart and sell clothes in Uganda is like. The imported clothes “makes it difficult for designers to produce clothing that is competitive, the second hand clothes are so cheap.” Economically, the large uptake in cheap clothing from other countries has brought on the downfall of local industries

Why didn't these countries ban the importation of these second hand clothes if it is so harmful to them? The truth is that they tried to; in 2016 the East Africa Community (EAC) tried to ban the importation of second hand clothes, to grow and revive their own industry. The response of the US was to threaten to revoke the African Growth and Opportunity Act if EAC were to ban the importing of second hand clothes. This Act would reduce tariffs on trade from Africa to the US. Since then certain African countries have outright banned buying large quantities of second hand clothes from abroad, such as Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and Uganda while countries in the EAC have responded by raising taxes on imported clothes.

If you told someone in our community that the clothes that they are generously donating to our local thrift store and charity are contributing to the vast economic and environmental textile problem in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, they wouldn't believe you. Education and individual efforts to divert end-of-life textiles from going to landfills is how change will begin to take place. Buying clothes made to be durable is the way to start leading a sustainable lifestyle. While the prices of fast fashion items, especially online, might be tempting but in the long term there is no benefit to buying clothes that are not meant to last. Supporting brands that understand that recycling, repairing, and reusing is key. Brands like North Face that encourage customers to drop off worn clothing and shoes to any of their stores to be sent to Soles4Souls, a non-profit that distributes donations to those in need. In turn customers receive a \$10 bonus on their next purchase.

Another way to make the most of clothes is by creatively transforming them or upcycling. Online videos are an easily accessible way to learn to upcycle, it saves money from having to buy new products and makes something fun out of old clothes. Recently more classes are being offered on sewing and repairing clothes in an effort to reduce the amount of textile going to landfills. Learning to repair clothes and accessories is a useful skill but if that is not of interest, paying a professional to repair clothes works just as well. Clothes swapping events are a cheap and positive way to source clothes and keep clothes in the community and out of landfills.

For Nova Scotia to become efficient and sustainable we need to tackle the problem of textile waste. One solution to increase the quantity of clothes being recycled in Nova Scotia is creating

a textile facility that is designed to turn the donated/discarded textiles into new materials or items. Having a site like this would have continual benefits to the environment, economy, and resources in Nova Scotia. It would create new jobs while continuing the push towards green options.

A good example of a well designed textile recycling facility is UPPAREL. This Australian company converts donated textiles into useful materials. They invested in machinery to break and pull apart the textiles into fine, fluffy material to then be used to make pillow stuffing, pet beds, and bean bag chairs. Applying pressure and heat to this fluffy material transforms it to another multi-use, more dense material that can be used as insulation or as cushioning. A high amount of pressure and heat makes the recycled material rigid for posters, packaging, and more.

The province needs to encourage business and industries to reduce textile waste by giving them support in the form of financial incentives. By sourcing materials within the province or region we directly support local manufacturers and cut the cost of importing them from out of province. To increase the public awareness on the benefits of textile diversion the province can hold innovative workshops and discussions. They should encourage and conduct focus groups on the topic of textile diversion including residential and business pathways.

Without any of these alternatives the end-of-life textiles from my community will continue to be either thrown out with the other solid waste or donated to our local thrift store. The unsold clothes indirectly are supplied to Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, extending the amount of superfluous clothes that are destructive to the environment, economy and culture. Without an adept system for large scale textile recycling, North America is essentially pawning off the waste to other countries. This is not right and we must all do our part to create change. Important individual actions that can be taken include making efforts to swap, shop second-hand, donate to small thrift stores, mending, repairing and upcycling, as well as purchasing clothes that are meant to last. A provincially supported textile recycling facility would be a game changer for the future of textile recycling. This would be an important step to creating a much needed circular economy for textiles in Nova Scotia. It is important that we all think more about our clothes and the global impact our choices make.

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