

Hidden in Plain Sight: The Future of Sustainable Design Materials

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What if something that is usually thrown away could become the future of sustainable design?

For Utah State University Outdoor Product Design and Development alum Kaitlyn Rowbury, that question isn't hypothetical. It's the foundation of her work, transforming wasted sheep wool into innovative, wearable design.

Kaitlyn didn't always see herself as a designer.

"I was always doing art in my free time," she said. It wasn't until her brother's teacher saw her artwork and encouraged her to look into USU's Outdoor Product Design and Development program that everything changed. She switched her major from illustration to design, and it quickly felt like the right fit.

"It's been really rewarding," she said. "Doesn't feel like work, just fun, exploration, creative design."

While studying design, Rowbury found inspiration in a resource many people overlook: sheep wool. About 90% of Utah's wool is discarded instead of being used. Working alongside Chad Page, USU's sheep and goat specialist, she saw an opportunity to give that material a second life.

She began creating saddle blankets for English and Western riders to use and hopes to continue expanding wool's potential through apparel, padding, and even her own hand-spun textiles. Her work comes at a time when more consumers are questioning the environmental impact

of synthetic materials. As concerns about microplastics continue to grow, natural fibers like wool are becoming an increasingly attractive alternative. Using locally sourced wool also reduces waste and transportation while creating a more transparent supply chain.

"We can't continue with the amount of synthetics that we're using," Kaitlyn said. "I wanted to change that."

The project has also created a unique partnership between USU's Department of Animal, Dairy & Veterinary Sciences and Outdoor Product Design and Development program.

"Bringing in the collaboration between the animal science side of things and outdoor product design allows us to catch creative ideas that we as animal scientists haven't yet figured out," Page said.

The collaboration is just getting started, with more partnerships between the programs expected in the future.

For Rowbury, the project brings together everything she cares about.

"I want to make sure my passions are pieced together, so I can always be enjoying what I'm doing," she says. "I love agriculture, I love nature, being outside, and I love design. Bringing them together is kind of perfect."

Sometimes the future isn't something entirely new. Sometimes it's a resource that's been here all along, just waiting for someone to see its potential.

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