Planet pays heavy price for cheap new T-shirts on shelves

RE-USE: Melanie MacDonald, Grantown's Highland Hospice manageress, with some stock.

Sustainable Strathspey

Dr Peter Grant

LAST week I had a rummage in my drawers – well to be more precise, I hunted out my entire collection of T shirts.

I counted them, and reflected on how often I wore each one, and what, if anything, it meant to me.

I found a total of 21, each of which elicited emotions ranging from profound nostalgia to indifference.

Some were treasured old friends – like the 1990 Redback Brewery shirt, so worn that it now resembles the web of the spider that provided its name.

Others looked as new as on the day that I had been given them: one was a freebie for taking part in an instantly-forgotten sponsored event.

What prompted this exercise?

I recently read a Royal Scottish Geographical Society account of the environmental impact of the fashion industry in general, and T-shirts in particular, and learned that clothing production now accounts for 10 per cent of global carbon emissions.

Along the way, the azo dyes used in 70 per cent of textiles will have released cadmium, lead, chromium, and mercury – all of which are carcinogens

Fashion is now second only to oil as a polluter.

Globally, two billion T shirts are sold every year, and before reaching you each one will have consumed on average 2700 litres of water, enough to fill 30 bathtubs.

This average T shirt will have started its life in a field in India, China, or Turkey as cotton, a plant treated with more pesticides than any other crop.

Globally, only one per cent of cotton is grown organically and without pesticides.

The cotton will then have been harvested entirely mechanically, and started a long journey, first to be made into yarn, then fabric, in India, and then to be manufactured into a T shirt in Bangladesh, China, India or Turkey before travelling on to its retail destination.

Along the way, the azo dyes used in 70 per cent of textiles will have released cadmium, lead, chromium, and mercury – all of which are carcinogens.

The transport emissions will have added to the environmental impact.

What has been the outcome of my reflections?

For a start, I'll hesitate before looking for another T-shirt, and if I do, my first port of call will be my excellent local Highland Hospice shop, where I'm assured of a friendly welcome, and a range of good quality pre-owned T- shirts.

Heading west up the strath I could also find the Red Cross, Sue Ryder, and Highland Hospice shops in Aviemore, The Charity Shop in Kingussie, and Blythswood Care in Newtonmore.

Research by WRAP in the UK shows that extending the average life of clothes, which is 2.2 years, by just three months of active use per item would lead to a 5-10% reduction in each of its carbon, water and waste footprints.

If I'm tempted to buy a new Tshirt, I'll look at the ethics behind its production, will beware of greenwash, and will be prepared to pay a bit more with a view to keeping it longer.

Any shirts that I haven't worn in the past year I'll donate to the charity shop, or if they're looking a bit like me, I'll take them to a local textile bank, which can be found at: Aviemore and Grantown recycling centres and Fire Stations, Aviemore Primary School, Burnfield car park Grantown, and the Market Stance Kingussie.

■ Peter Grant is a member of Grantown-based Sustainable Strathspey. Find out more about the group on the Facebook page.