



The big shwop

By Sarah Alice Hopkins

Like many of you, I am the proud owner of one burgeoning eco-friendly heart. It began beating because my overly-loud conscience just couldn't stop thinking about exploited workers, wasted resources, and the poor polar bears drowning. I suspect I may have watched just one too many film festival docos about the plight of the earth. Who knows, but somewhere and somehow my heartbeat turned green.

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I find myself rather virtuously car-pooling, composting, gardening, buying fair trade products, joining political parties and possibly ranting a little too often about the aforementioned activities a little too much. So, although we don't yet have a solar panel and embarrassingly, I can't knit, I would call myself an amateur Emerald Greenie.

The problem is this. I love clothes. I know I shouldn't, I know the world would be better if we could all just stick with the same pair of slacks for a year or two but, well, I just can't. In past times, when admittedly I cared a little less, I just loved to shop. But as my eco-worrier got a little more worried, I could see that this clothing addiction would have to be stopped. At first, I craftily soothed my conscience by op-shopping madly and buying Aotearoa made clothing when I just had to buy something new. My conscience was quiet and my wardrobe was full.

It worked - for a while anyway. Then my fashion hound started scratching at the door. You see, while our NZ labels may have gorgeous threads, they are not going to throw a \$20 special at you and my bank balance was suffering for it. I was also getting bored of ferreting through a myriad of pilly jumpers at opportunity shops and I found myself salivating over my friend's new clothes.

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I would get within a hair's breadth of an attractive looking fashion store with hard-to-believe prices and rather than turn to the Sallies, my eco-pulse would strangely quieten as I walked in the door. Things had to change, and quick.

I sat down with Inga Boyd, a good friend of mine, who shared a great deal of my chagrin, discussed our plight and conjured up a plan to have a clothes swap. We emailed our girls and around they came, with bundles of clothes in tow. Four hours later we all had new threads for our wardrobes. It was just too easy. More than that, it was a great deal of fun. Compelled to share our joy, and our wardrobes with other girls, we decided to put some action where our hearts were. We wanted a larger-scale community-focused event. Eureka! The Big Shwop was born.

The Big Shwop is an eco-event that brings Welly girls and their wardrobes together for an afternoon of shopping that doesn't make a dent on their bank accounts, or their consciences. The idea is pretty straightforward - girls bring along their unwanted, barely-worn, fashionable clothes and exchange them for vouchers. When the shwop begins, girls can 'cash in' their vouchers for any of the lovely threads that others have brought in.

The word 'shwop' is a combination of 'shop' and 'swap' and highlights the idea that we can pass on what we are not using to someone else and get back some cool new things at the same time. The events have proven to be a great opportunity for girls to make the most of their existing wardrobes. Recycling what we have already means that we consume a little less. The beauty of shwopping to me is that people still get the satisfaction of acquiring something new without spending a cent or using more of the world's resources. Ahh, clear consciences straight ahead!

The first Big Shwop ran on August 2nd at the Southern Cross, Abel Smith Street, in the heart of Wellington. Unsure of the amount of attention the idea would generate, Inga and I cautiously estimated that we might get around eighty shwoppers on the day. As the line got longer and longer, it became clear how open to fresh ideas girls from the capital were and what potential shwopping truly has. Inspired, we set up the second event, The Big Shwop – Summer Special, which ran on Saturday 29th November and was fantastic. It looks as though the next one we have here in the capital will have to be even bigger again.

We've had lots of support from some great eco-conscious companies to get the concept off the ground, we got The Big Shwop trademarked and we are now aiming to bring The Big Shwop to other places around the country. In fact, we have already begun to stretch our legs with the next Big Shwop planned to run in conjunction with the Sustainable Home and Garden Show in Paraparaumu on April 4th. Yay! If you are interested in coming along to shwop, check us online at www.thebigshwop.co.nz

It's an exciting time - we are glad we didn't just have an idea, but that we actually acted on it. In hindsight, we possibly should have guessed that the idea of getting something for next to nothing was going to be super attractive. But what is even cooler is that by shwopping it is not just our wallets that are happier, but our big, old earth too.

Goodness, I can feel my eco-pulse quickening already.

Sarah Alice Hopkins is a co-founder of The Big Shwop - email her and Inga at thebigshwop@gmail.com, or find out about upcoming events online at www.thebigshwop.co.nz