What We Wear (cont.)
downward pressure on workers’ wages and working conditions.

Global Citizen
Many consumers are left with uncertainty as to a responsible course of action. Some have begun to look to fair trade certification as an answer, seeking out businesses that promise adherence to ethical labor and environmental standards. Yet considering the vast preponderance of garments manufactured by major brands, a more comprehensive, sector-wide approach is needed.

One possible beginning step for individuals is a basic one: moving beyond the identity of “ethical consumer” to embrace the broader, more responsive identity of global citizen. The former is still closely identified with the products we choose, the latter with an awareness of the social relations defined by a globalized capitalist economy. As a more encompassing term, citizenship entails a responsibility for continuing self-education no matter what one’s stage of life may be.

Organizations like the Clean Clothes Campaign and the Asia Floor Wage Alliance. These umbrella organizations represent broad coalitions of trade unions and human rights organizations, and their response to the issues is political. They engage in advocacy, lobbying, and public education to support garmentworkers’ rights (including freedom of association and union representation) across the national boundaries that transnational corporations so easily traverse. The Asia Floor Wage Alliance makes a crucial distinction between the legal minimum wage in many of the producing countries and a living wage that enables workers to support themselves and their families with dignity.

More than 50 years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote from Birmingham, Alabama, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny.” If he had written those words today from Dhaka or Mumbai, Phnom Penh or Jakarta, they’d ring as true now as they ever did.

Time to end the “Throwaway Culture”
Of the many challenging phrases from Pope Francis, his challenge about the "throwaway culture" is particularly relevant for us in the United States. In his general audience on the 2013 World Environment Day (June 5), newly in his papacy, Pope Francis said:

Are we truly cultivating and caring for creation? Or are we exploiting and neglecting it? ... [We are] losing our attitude of wonder, of contemplation, of listening to creation and thus we no longer manage to interpret in it what Benedict XVI calls “the rhythm of the love-story between God and man.”

The Guardian newspaper of London reported this month that Americans now deposit in landfills 12.8 million tons of clothing, annually. In brief, we shed, without recycling, an average of 87 pounds of clothing per person in the U.S. We are often blind to our actual consumption of clothing.

As one of the largest industries, fashion has a very real power to impact the climate change conversation across the globe.

Ashlan Cousteau