



Graeme places a high importance on animal welfare standards on his own farm and those of his fleece suppliers



The ethics of yarn

Graeme Bethune argues that paying a fair price for wool will lead to better yarn quality and environmental sustainability



WHAT IS an ethical yarn? There is no legal definition for you to rely upon, unlike the label 'organic', so its use by businesses is open to a wide variety of meaning - or none. So when you

see the term 'ethical' attached to a yarn, I urge you to ask the seller what they mean. They should be delighted to tell you; ethical folk will want to tell you. I use the term freely in talking about my own yarns, and am happy to explain why I think so.

How is my own business ethical? The cornerstone of my ethics is a policy I call Living Value - this is something I am very proud of, because I came up with it myself. It's a mash-up of two other well known concepts: living wage, and market value. At its most simple, it means that I choose to set a respectful price when I buy fleece in from other farmers. I do not let the market set the price; I set the price I pay for fleece - one I feel truly respects the quality, hard work and skill of producing great wool.

By setting a higher price for fleece, Living Value helps to pay farm bills, and that encourages the farmer to spend more on their sheep welfare - at the vet, or the seed merchant, say - which in turn raises the health and wellbeing of their sheep, which then improves the quality of the

fleece. So the spiral of money and quality goes upwards and no longer downwards. Further, it gives greater pride to the farmer who can now afford to care for their sheep as they wish. The extra money honestly reflects the value and quality of their sheep, and the farmers' hard work and care through the year. Surely this is worth me making just a wee bit less profit?

Market value is a race to the bottom, looking always to pay less, whereas I say ethically we should pay just a wee bit more and make just a wee bit less. Market value pressures farmers to cut costs to stay in business, because their world-class fleece is worth pennies. This can't be right!

This year, for example, the market value of Cheviot fleece was about £0.35 a kilo. But following Living Value, I paid £5 a kilo for Cheviot. This eats into my bottom line as a retailer, but not disastrously: it puts £1 on my bottom line per 100g ball of yarn. That means I get a smaller profit, but still a decent one. That's good ethical business practice, in my opinion - being willing to accept getting just a wee bit less money in your own pocket, while being happy to see more in the pockets of your suppliers.

Squeezing suppliers to death to provide cheap yarn is short-term madness. Paying farmers pennies for their wool leads to dire consequences: farmers going broke, their fleece representing a huge drain on farm

finances, costing the farmer precious time and money for no return. Lower animal welfare standards, less cash value per ewe per year, means less money available for the upkeep of that ewe to promote their health, and a lower fleece quality. A degrading environment, where farmers have to push the environs of their farm past sustainable levels to achieve profit by economies of scale. This downward spiral cannot be sustained - either farmers will stop sheep farming, or they will exhaust the environment which sustains their animals. Both are ongoing and both are disastrous for the future of British yarn.

When starting Caithness Yarns I thought seriously about what kind of a business I wanted. I wanted to be successful, yes; I wanted to put my farm on a better economic footing, sure. But more than that I wanted to do the right thing; I needed to be able to look myself in the mirror satisfied that I was a good man. I believe wholeheartedly that there is a good life and also a good livelihood to be had from doing the right thing. Many of the yarn businesses you know and love act in similar ways. I urge you to ask then about their practices, and find your own definition of what you think ethical yarn means. ☺

Find out more about Graeme and his sheep and yarns at www.caithnessyarns.com

Next Month: Graeme explains the importance of winter care for his flock