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Eco-Publishing in The Book Industry: An Interdisciplinary Case Study with Patagonia Books

Julie A. Collins
Portland State University

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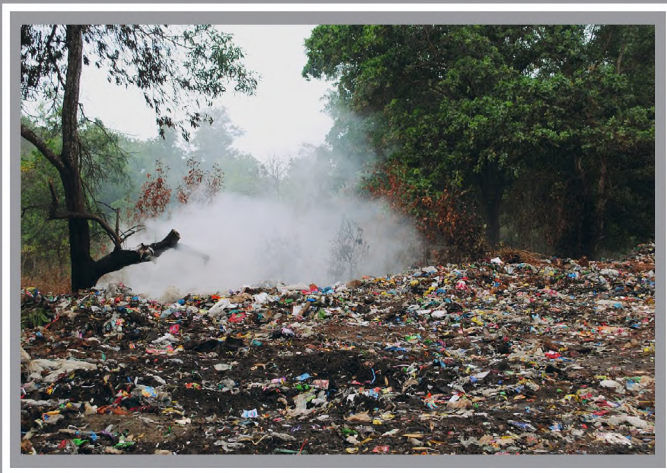
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Eco-Publishing in The Book Industry: An Interdisciplinary Case Study with Patagonia Books

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Julie A. Collins, Book Publishing MS

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Rachel Noorda

Portland State University

Research Question

Why should a publishing house consider becoming an eco-publisher?

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore eco-publishing in the book industry with an interdisciplinary approach: I will address eco-trends in human movements and essential industries; provide an overview of the book industry's recent efforts to determine their environmental impact; and explore eco-publishing in practice by presenting findings from a case study of Patagonia Books featuring an interview with their publisher Karla Olson. This analysis of environmentalism on a broad scale gives us the ability to see how trends outside the industry may affect how we define the goals of publishing, and of particular publishing houses. Patagonia Books is unique in their modeling because they are housed within Patagonia's larger outdoors and apparel business. While the differences between Patagonia Books and more traditional publishing houses will be recognized, these differences allow us to examine what has become a bold testing ground for eco-publishing. By combining these study methods, three main reasons emerge to answer the question: *Why should a publishing house consider becoming an eco-publisher?* For all stakeholders in publishing, this paper will demonstrate why further interdisciplinary research and collaboration is needed to make the option of eco-publishing both effective and accessible throughout the industry.

Background: The Existential Discourse in 2020

It is important to note the context in which I am pushing this topic to the forefront of conversation in book publishing. This new decade brought with it a massive change to human lifestyle across the globe as a result of the coronavirus commonly referred to as COVID-19. The virus spreads easily through dense populations, lingers on common surfaces, has a long incubation period, and can spread through asymptomatic carriers who show no sign of sickness. Not a single continent on earth has been unaffected. The pandemic has forced businesses to close, travel to seriously decrease, and people to stay home. Some work from home, if they were lucky enough to retain employment, and students from kindergarten to graduate-levels attend class from home via the video conferencing service Zoom. All are required, or at least encouraged, to wear face masks when they go to the grocery store. This four-month period of time in which the virus has had over three million confirmed cases, claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, and tested medical facilities around the world to their absolute limits, has been a fragile one to say the least (Our World in Data).

Update: As of October 10, 2020, the conservative report of confirmed COVID-19 deaths stands at 1.07 million. Over 200,000 of those confirmed deaths have been in the United States (Our World in Data). In addition to the tragedies and challenges of this ongoing pandemic, I am conscious that this paper is being published during a significant movement for racial justice—a movement specifically demanding systematic changes long overdue to improve the lives, opportunities, and safeties of Black people (see blacklivesmatter.com). Since May, the West Coast has seen the worst season of wildfires yet, losing over 5 million acres across California, Oregon, and Washington and compromising air quality for many communities (NY Times, 2020). Amidst the rising health, social, and environmental challenges of this year, we have moved closer and closer to the next presidential election. Our incumbent president, Donald Trump, is currently being treated for COVID-19 and has refused to debate his opponent Joe Biden virtually.

While I do not think it is necessary to rewrite this paper with updated examples at this time, I want to emphasize that the context in which we find ourselves now, or the context in which you find yourself when reading this paper, will and should color your reflection on these subjects. This is a research topic that should be pushed to evolve alongside the latest changes to the book industry, to our socio-economic and political environments, and to the discourse amongst leaders in science.

How is all of this relevant to eco-publishing in the book industry? Throughout this paper, I will note some observable changes to human behavior and discourse since the virus emerged, because those changes should affect every business' decision-making going forward. Publishers would be wise to heed their own observations and any valid research that emerges regarding changes in people's personal, professional, and consumer lives going forward. Provided they have the bandwidth, publishers might conduct their own audience research or hire a consultant to provide guidance in the face of change. During this time of introspection, big picture elements such as a publisher's business model, mission, and brand may be revisited—as these elements are remolded or refined, publishers will face questions such as: 'why am I in business?' and 'how do I want to do business?' The human discourse is one of the most powerful factors publishers have to help them decide what to acquire and how to publish. Therefore, in questioning why a publisher might want to pursue eco-publishing practices, it will be useful to consider how our book-buying audience evolves alongside the publishing industry. As a general concept, this is not new advice—change has always been a constant. However, the rate of change and the dramatic nature of those changes recently cannot be ignored. It is beyond the scope of this paper for me to address all the effects of the pandemic on the book world, but it is my hope that eco-publishing research be included in a rich anthology of adaptive measures worthy of our consideration.

Climate Change, Eco-Trends, and the Footprint of Making Books

Climate Change

Amongst discussions about the “new normal” that will be defined as we emerge from the experience of COVID-19, one topic has managed to retain its newsworthy popularity: climate change. Between May 7-9, 2020, the following stories were released:

- “Potentially fatal bouts of heat and humidity on the rise, study finds” (*The Guardian*)
- “G.O.P. Coronavirus Message: Economic Crisis is a Green New Deal Preview” (*The New York Times*)
- “Humidity and heat extremes are on the verge of exceeding limits of human survivability, study finds” (*Washington Post*)
- “Climate Change matters more than ever during the coronavirus” (*Los Angeles Times*)
- “Mike Carney: ‘We can’t self-isolate from climate change’” (BBC News)
- “Environment more sustainable than development in pandemic” (*Buenos Aires Times*)
- “Governors can lead the way on climate too” (*The Boston Globe*)

Two of the seven above articles cite the results of recent scientific research without mention of the virus. The other five do mention the virus, but do so while highlighting the urgency of climate change issues. As people adapt to dealing with a health crisis, the science community may continue to gain more eager listeners for their reports on climate change and the calls to action by supportive activist

groups. Already, political candidates are moving environmental issues up on their agendas regardless of whether they believe in the issues or are responding to popular opinion (NRDC Action Fund, 2020).



Led by the 17-year-old pioneer in climate change activism and politics, Greta Thunberg (pictured left), an international force of over a million young people has rallied to fight for the security of their futures. Even without the ability to demonstrate together, Greta leads others to post from home with messages for the world and its leaders to see. The messaging of this movement contrasts past environmental movements where the disjointed actions of individuals and small groups were easy for governments to dismiss as unorganized, naïve, or just one element in a mixed bag of counterculture. Speeches from Greta and others, like Uganda’s Fridays for Future founder Hilda Nakabuye (pictured right), reinforce clear demands—here they are from the Fridays for Future website:

1. Keep the global temperature rise below 1.5 °C compared to pre-industrial levels.
2. Ensure climate justice and equity.
3. Listen to the best united science currently available. (*Fridays for Future*)

Generational studies show that Millennials—who make up 25% of the current U.S. population and cover the age range of mid-20s to early 40s—pay close attention to social media and influencers, need peer reviews or recommendations by word of mouth in order to make a purchase, and are extremely conscious of where their time and dollars go (particularly because they are likely to have high-debt and low-income). The upcoming generation, Gen-Z, includes individuals in their preteens to mid-20s. Some of Gen-Z is eligible to vote, but many are not; and while most of this generation has probably practiced their own spending, they have not had the ability to speak with their dollars yet in full force. Still, the group is largely environmentally conscious, longs for opportunities to establish their values and control, responds best to authentic marketing, and is independent, thrifty, and frugal with their money (Crummer-Olson, “Publishing Across Generations”). Gen-Z was born into a time of war and recession, and its individuals are about to enter the job marketplace in the second recession of their lifetime through no fault of their own. To summarize in the words of Greta Thunberg, this generation can hardly be blamed for thinking “How dare you?” As this generation comes of age,

large corporations resist change and rely on the brand loyalty of older generations—leaving space for a fresh new wave of value-driven entrepreneurs to innovate and thrive.

Eco-Trends in Essential Business and Products

Eco-trends in the food, home cleaning, personal hygiene, and clothing industries have gained momentum with support from this growing eco-conscious audience. A consumer analysis from the International Food Information Council (IFIC) in 2020 concluded that environmental sustainability ranks among the top-five food and nutrition trends anticipated for the year:

Consumers will seek greater understanding of the term sustainability in 2020 . . . The IFIC Foundation's 2019 Food and Health Survey found 63% of respondents said it was hard to know whether the food choices they make are sustainable, and 63% said environmental sustainability would have a greater influence on their choices if it were easier to know. (Gelski, "IFIC")

The biggest takeaway here is that customers are seeking "greater understanding" of what is eco-friendly and what is not. With the process of food shopping responsibly continuing to elicit frustration, the increasing desire for *transparency* in labeling and *authenticity* in branding sends a clear message to the food industry: people want clarity. The IFIC also concludes: "People in 2020 will become more concerned about the role the food system plays in climate change, including the effects of agricultural production, food waste, and transportation of goods" (Gelski, "IFIC"). While these concerns are expressed specifically within the context of the food system, it is notable that the environmental impact of book publishing largely concerns its reliance on tree farms and forests, material and electronic waste, and the distribution system—all related to agriculture, waste, and transportation (more on publishing's impact coming up). If people are growing concerned with the food system's impact on climate change, how long will it take for systems across all industries to be questioned?

Through their quest for transparent marketing, customers have also acquired the desire to know the products they buy did no harm. At this moment in time, a company that can prove no harm was done to people or the environment in their production cycle has a leg up on its competitors with this audience. So how is proof provided? In food products, required ingredients labels have begun to do this work as people become increasingly educated about what to look for. Extra information such as "free-range" and "wild caught," or certifications such as non-GMO, Fair Trade, Food Alliance Certified, and Certified Sustainable Seafood can prove that action was taken to prevent harm.

Many eco-friendly cleaning product companies have emerged in recent years, all who notably tackle the challenge of packaging their products responsibly in addition to ensuring the product itself contains no harmful chemicals. Between the five brands Mrs. Meyers, Method, Seventh Generation, Dr. Bronner's, and Ever Spring, the average amount of post-consumer recycled plastic in their packaging is 75%:

- Mrs. Meyers, 25%
- Ever Spring, 50%
- Method, 100% (B Corps)
- Seventh Generation, 100% (B Corps)
- Dr. Bronner's, 100% (B Corps)

These brands are mentioned specifically because they are no longer difficult to find in large grocery and department stores. Unlike a decade ago, there is also a disappearing gap in price between eco-friendly brands and their older counterparts (for example, I recently found Method and Ever Spring brand laundry detergent marked lower per ounce than Dial in Target). The increase in demand from customers for value-driven brands combined with the accessible pricing means eco-business has the potential to be a profitable venture and compete successfully in the wider marketplace.

In the clothing industry, the popularity of thrift stores and rise of eco-conscious companies has mirrored the concerns discussed above. On clothing, tags provide information about the material and the manufacturing origin of items. New signals of the company's business practices include the tagging material—such as paper and thread instead of plastic—and statements on the tagging about the company's mission, tagline, and/or accomplishments. Patagonia, for example, has a long history of pursuing eco-practices, which they now reflect in their simple mission statement: *We are in business to save the home planet*. Messages of commitment like Patagonia's are catching the attention of customers and resulting in brand loyalty and the willingness to pay a bit more for a responsibly-made product (Pícha and Navrátil, 2019). In a volume of the *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology, and Education*, an article reads: "As environmental awareness in the apparel and textile industry has expanded, stakeholders have developed various tools for measuring environmental impacts throughout the product lifecycle" (Lou and Cao, 2017). Quantifying the average environmental impact of an industry or business is becoming an expectation equivalent to getting a check-up at the doctor's every year or two. So, before examining the environmental efforts of the book industry, it will be useful to establish what we know about the impact of the paper, printing, and publishing chains.

The Environmental Impact of Paper, Printing, and Publishing

The State of the Global Paper Industry is a comprehensive update from the *Environmental Paper Network* and is essential information to acknowledge when discussing environmental practices in book publishing. This yearly update serves to provide "a snapshot of how the world's pulp and paper industry is performing today, relative to each of the goals of the Global Paper Vision" (Martin and Haggath, 2018). Of all the resources and practices related to book production, the deforestation of virgin forests and making of paper contribute most significantly to the environmental footprint of the book. North Americans and Europeans are consuming four times the global average of paper per person (Martin and Haggath, 2018). The authors highlight the need to increase paper recycling:

Currently recycled fiber use in products is by no means uniform: while many newsprint and packaging grades have more than 50% recycled content, printing and writing paper has a global average of only 8% recycled content, so there is still much room for improvement. By more effectively controlling contamination and implementing more robust recycling systems in developing countries, the amount of recycled fiber that could be used could still be nearly doubled before it reaches the upper limit of technical potential. (Martin and Haggath, 2018)

And the issues of contamination and mismanaged recycling systems are not restricted to developing countries—in their last Environmental Trends Report in 2016, the Book Industry Environmental Council (BIEC) listed single stream recycling as a major obstacle to collecting acceptable recycled paper for use in the paper mills. Specific reasons why single stream recycling has influenced a reduction in recycled fiber paper use are as follows: a) contamination of paper from other wet or dirty recycling

reduces the amount of fiber that can be saved by de-inking facilities (which also raises the cost of fiber); b) sorting high quality fiber from single stream recycling is time intensive and less effective than pre-sorting models; c) paper fiber is considered less valuable than metal and glass in the recycling stream, causing its recovery to be deprioritized; and d) paper fiber absorbs moisture when not pre-sorted, increasing its weight in transportation. So, despite an increase in recycling efforts by individuals, their work is being negated by the single-stream recycling system that allows their paper to be dumped in the landfills. Diverting waste from landfills is an important eco-practice because landfills produce increasing amounts of methane, which has an atmospheric impact 25 times greater than that of carbon—both are scientifically proven contributors to climate change. Trees, in addition to giving us the oxygen we need to breathe, are carbon *sinks*—meaning they take carbon out of the atmosphere and thus decrease the speed of global warming. Therefore, at both the beginning and end of a traditional print book's life cycle, environmental impacts exist, whether we can quantify these impacts or not.

Other reasons noted by the BIEC in 2016 for the reduction of recycled fiber use in U.S. books include the exporting of recycled fiber to markets overseas (particularly to China), and the closure of mills who manufactured paper with recycled content (namely, FutureMark Paper and Manistique). The BIEC did not cite a percentage for the amount of recycled fiber exported by the States, and upon investigating the Environmental Protection Agency's information on U.S. paper and recycling, I was disappointed to find that most statistics on their website have not been updated since 2013. This makes their information too old for me to reasonably include in this assessment.

Update: Since writing this paper, the EPA has updated their website. Recent data now covers up to 2017. In 2017, paper and paperboard made of 25% of municipal waste (MCW) in the U.S. and 13.2% of MCW set to the landfill. The EPA reports that 66% of paper and paperboard products generated in 2017 were recycled (compared to 8% of plastics generated)—however, it is unknown how much of that recycled material was responsibly sorted and made available for reuse. Their methodology document for data collection on MCW generation, recycling, and disposal has not been updated since 2014. The next update on data will be telling—in 2018, China's Ministry of Environmental Protection banned the continuation of scrap material imports, including that of U.S. paper and plastic. (“[Facts and Figures](#)”)

Since releasing the report in 2016 with the Green Press Initiative, the BIEC's activity has been absent from the visible discourse in publishing. In fact, I only discovered the existence of the BIEC through my deep dive into researching what happened to the Green Press Initiative. The history of these two organizations are worth tracking and documenting, as they represent the book industry's overall response to environmental concerns thus far.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to detail, the conclusion of my findings are: 1) the Green Press Initiative was founded in 2001 by Todd Pollack and rallied the environmental commitment of over 200 publishers in the form a signed treatise on responsible paper use; 2) Pollack joined with the Book Industry Study Group to create the BIEC and together they published three [Environmental Trends reports](#); 3) In October of 2016, SEE Innovation discontinued the work of the Green Press project as its parent organization, and Pollack stepped down as coordinator of the BIEC, having been moved to work on another initiative for SEE Innovation (Midland Paper); 4) the BIEC's coordinator for the past four years has been Valerie Lyle, who has a background working in purchasing and production at Harper Collins and Random House and is on the board of directors at Saw Mill River Audubon (a paper manufacturer)—the BIEC has not published a new report since Pollack's departure (BIEC); and 5) the Green Press Initiative no longer has a landing page, making it difficult to track down records of their research, action, and contributing members. Further research is needed

to confirm whether the disappearance of industry-level leadership in environmental sustainability is reflective of lack of action, active resistance, or a mix of both. In the meantime, eco-publishers and those interested in eco-publishing must turn to each other and the examples of successful eco-publishing to become educated about the current research and options available.

Update: On August 18, 2020, the BISG held a Webinar titled “Sustainable Publishing: Where We Need To Go” with panelists from Midland Paper Company and MacMillan, and an independent consultant in the field. This is a positive sign that the virtual connectivity of our industry during the pandemic is allowing space for big picture conversations. During this webinar, the suggestion was made that the BIEC or a similar committee within BISG should regroup to lead the way in sustainable publishing—a very exciting prospect. The recording of this webinar is [available here](#).

Methodology

To answer the question *Why should a publishing house consider becoming an eco-publisher?*, I first thought that determining the environmental footprints of books developed with different production methods would be the most useful data to present. There are two reasons why I quickly abandoned this method: 1) I did not possess the time, skill, or access to the mass amount of data necessary to accomplish the task, and 2) even if I were able to successfully compare the environmental footprints of books, this information would only address one of the multiple reasons why a publishing house should consider eco-publishing: moral grounds. Those who believe that good business models need to support the wellbeing of our natural environment would see the logic in considering eco-publishing practices, whether or not the effects of those practices are known to be negative or positive to the profitability of the business. So, I pursued a method that would more effectively illuminate all the reasons why a publishing house might consider eco-publishing; in this way, I hope to address all publishers looking for guidance on the subject.

In my early research in the trade publications *Publisher’s Weekly*, *Shelf Awareness*, and the *IBPA magazine*, searches for environmentally sustainable publishing, or eco-publishing, kept bringing up the names of two publishers: Margo Baldwin of Chelsea Green Publishing and Karla Olson of Patagonia’s book publishing team. These individuals have proved themselves to be pioneers in eco-publishing and well-respected in the book industry for their innovation and involvement. Of the two possible case studies, I determined Patagonia to be the most useful for this paper because Olson, as a publisher within a larger non-publishing company, could speak to some of the interdisciplinary concepts I wanted to address. I contacted her by email and arranged the interview to be conducted via Zoom. Before the interview, Olson signed a consent form as her agreement to take part in the study, allowing 1) the interview to be recorded, 2) her words to be quoted and/or paraphrased, and 3) her name to be used in this paper. In addition, the consent form states that her participation is voluntary; she has the right to pass on any question she does not wish to answer; and if at any point she wants to end the interview, she can do so. This study was determined to be one with minimal risk, the risk being that her confidentiality is breached in some way. As a preventative measure, Karla Olson’s photo will not be published with this research unless she provides written permission, and her contact information will not be directly provided in any documentation of this study.

In interviewing Karla Olson about eco-publishing in the context of her leadership of Patagonia’s book team, I designed the interview to address the following four sub-questions to my research question:

1. How should eco-publishing be defined? (*What is it*)
2. What are the crucial practices required in eco-publishing? (*What you commit to*)
3. What does eco-publishing look like in practice? (*How to follow through*)
4. What are the benefits of an eco-publishing model for a publishing house? (*Why do it*)

The interview questions below were sent to Olson several days ahead of our interview with the disclaimer that our interview would be a semi-structured conversation guided by these questions, rather than rigid back-and-forth restricted to one question at a time:

- What business do you represent? Describe the focus of the business (including its mission, products, and major audience) as well as your own role and major responsibilities.
- What are the key actions your business takes to be environmentally sustainable?
- Of those, which cost the most and how do you make the action(s) viable? Are there other areas where you're able to save money?
- Is your environmental commitment part of your business' mission and/or branding? If so, does this affect your business relationships (i.e. internally between employees, and outwardly between you and your partners, you and your reading audience)?
- If so, how? If not, why not?
- Do you view the choice to be an eco-friendly business as a responsibility? A good marketing move? A moral choice? Discuss.
- What additional eco-friendly actions might your business implement in the future? What barriers currently prevent the implementation of those actions?
- What are the benefits to being a B Corps?
- The clothing, food, and household cleaning industries have had a surge in eco-friendly businesses and products. Do you think they have been successful because these products are considered necessities? Could book products be considered necessary for human society in a similar way?
- Papermaking, printing, and publishing books requires collaboration and understanding between these three areas. Operations in each of the three have undergone some change, but their separate activities remain mysterious to many authors and readers. How might businesses become more transparent to these audiences?

In the future, I hope to repeat this interview process with other publishing houses in order to build an archive of case studies conducted to investigate eco-publishing. For now, the results of this case study are meant to be considered in tandem with the eco-trends and environmental analysis discussed in prior sections. Karla Olson's insight into the obstacles, strategies, reasoning, and practices of eco-publishing—as she has experienced them in the past eight years with Patagonia—sheds light on the relationship between a business' mission, production, partnerships, branding, and audience. The case study serves to highlight particular applications of eco-practice to the activities of the book industry so that publishers have more information about the option of eco-publishing and a model to follow should they be interested in adopting it.

Case Study: An Interview with Patagonia Publisher Karla Olson

The Roots

Because of their successful experience as an eco-business in clothing, Patagonia has been able to lean into their environmental mission and back up that branding authentically in practice. The company must maintain their eco-commitments in everything they do—not only because the employees believe it to be right, and because they value their status as a B corps, but because their brand is a promise to their customers they can't afford to break. The introduction of a publishing branch in 2007 enabled Patagonia to fulfill their mission to tell stories about people who experience journeys in nature, but brought with it eco-challenges for the production of a new object for the company: the book.

Olson speaks about her entrance to Patagonia and how it began:

Patagonia has been publishing books since 2007 and we just published our 50th book. I joined the company in 2012 when they were about to publish their 12th book. It started because they were taking a step back in 2006—Yvon Chouinard, who is the founder, owner, and guru of Patagonia, wrote his memoir, which is called *Let My People Go Surfing*, and was published by Penguin Random House. When that book was published, he and others at the company realized the power of telling a story in book form. Patagonia is known for telling stories in their catalogs. But those stories are around 750 words to maybe 1,250 words and no longer than that. And he realized that sometimes there's a story that needs more. It needs 75,000 words instead of 7,500. He also realized that even though you might engage fewer people reading 75,000 words, instead of 750 words, you're going to engage them on a deeper level. So, Patagonia started publishing books.

The tradition of taking a step back to check-in with the company's activity and direction began in 1994, when Yvon Chouinard and his team “stepped back” by taking a trip to Patagonia itself. They spent time in the area and asked themselves as a group “What are we doing here?” In a talk in 2013 at the University of California, Chouinard tells the story of this trip and the development of Patagonia's core values and business model. Among the top values established were to make quality products, make multi-purpose clothes and don't chase fashion (“We didn't want to make disposable clothes”), and do the least harm possible when making the products. *Let My People Go Surfing* is a title that captures Chouinard's motto about employees; he wanted to allow everyone the flexibility to work and play when they wanted—as long as the work got done, he was happy. What Chouinard and his team realized about their business early on was they might have to “break the rules of business” to honor their values—but that was worth doing, and besides, “It's actually a lot of fun breaking the rules, and we didn't want to do it the way everybody did,” says Chouinard (Yvon Chouinard).

So, with the unique roots of Patagonia and Patagonia Books established, let's take a look at how the publishing house runs. Olson says:

I'm what is essentially the publisher at Patagonia. And here's another unique thing about Patagonia. We don't have ranked titles, we have duty titles. So, my title is officially “Publishing, Books.” In the industry I refer to myself as the publisher. There are officially two people on the books team, myself and a senior editor—he's my righthand man. And then we have support staff from various other departments. We have a production coordinator who works with printers and other suppliers. Every book has a designer. There's

an art director, there is a photo researcher . . . I work with a category marketer for internal marketing, and I have a PR person who's separate from the company. And then I have a social media person.

This is typical publishing vernacular, and evidence of a standard team for a small to medium-sized press. Because Patagonia already had experience publishing robust catalogs, the process of building an in-house publishing team was fairly smooth. It's important to note that although the Patagonia company is there as a powerful marketing tool and financial safety net for the publishing house, Patagonia's book team operates on its own budget.

The Mission

In the case of Patagonia, their company mission has previously established values that need to be evident in their book products, both in the stories they acquire and the production of the physical objects. Olson illustrates how the Patagonia philosophy influences their acquisition process:

Our bestselling book is a book called *Training for the New Alpinism*, which is a very hard-core climbing training book. It's about training to climb, you know, 8,000-meter mountains, 20,000-foot mountains. And it's a good illustration of how we choose. Basically there's a huge explosion in people who are training and climbing in gyms and we want to get them outside because if we can get them to go outside and actually feel confident in training outside, then they're going to care about the place where they're climbing and understand that most of those places are on public lands and need to be protected. And they're going to then become advocates for environmental protection. It might not seem like direct activism—it might not be obvious—but it is right there. What I say is that nature is always the main character in our books; and man does not conquer nature, nature conquers man. Or, I would say nature *humbles* man. In our books it is more about the journey than it is about the accomplishment. I get a lot of proposals from people who say, "I conquered Mount Everest!" We don't publish those kinds of books. That's not the attitude. If you want to work with Patagonia, the attitude is, "I got my ass kicked." That's basically how it goes.

Olson's demonstration of Patagonia's logic at work is tight—she shows exactly how to translate a business' core values into what we could call "mini missions" such as: "nature is always the main character" and "it is more about the journey than it is about the accomplishment." The mini missions back up Patagonia's chief mission: *We are in business to save the home planet*, by giving nature a starring role and telling stories of people who learn something about their relationship with nature. Not all eco-publishers have to make the connection in the same way, but should consider writing down an in-house set of rules or statements that work to uphold the larger mission. Doing so will provide clarity to all employees, so they can purposefully contribute more directly to the mission (more on the value of employee wellness later). The mini missions can also more easily attract the authors and books you want to work with.

The above example shows how thoughtful consideration in not only the material production of books, but the content and tone of books, have value-based impacts that cannot be quantified but are no less important to upholding a publishing house's mission. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully address the impacts of successful mission management, but further research in this area combined with production-focused research could help publishers create a well-rounded eco-business model.

The Books: Production and Paper

The majority of my conversation with Olson revolved around answering the second interview question: What are the key actions your business takes to be environmentally sustainable? In addressing book production and printing, she says “If publishers could only make one change, that would be to move to printing on 100% post-consumer waste recycled paper.”

As opposed to pre-consumer wastepaper that is made from paper mill and printer scraps, post-consumer waste (PCW) paper is made from paper products that have been used and recycled by consumers. The environmental sustainability of papermaking is made stronger when humans implement effective systems for recycling and reusing the natural resources (in this case, trees) already taken from the earth. Therefore, PCW paper is the most eco-friendly option. Olson acknowledges that incremental steps are certainly better than no steps at all—so moving to 30% PCW paper, with a goal of raising that percentage to 100% over the next five years, for example, could be a more manageable plan for some.

Most publishers are already demanding paper that has been certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). The most common FSC label found in books will say “FSC Mix.” From the FSC website, here is what that certification means:

The FSC Mix label means the wood within the product is from FSC-certified forests, recycled material, or controlled wood. While not FSC-certified, controlled wood cannot be:

- illegally harvested
- harvested in violation of traditional and civil rights
- harvested in forests **where high conservation values are threatened**
- harvested in forests **being converted to plantations** or non-forest use
- harvested in forests where genetically modified trees are planted (FSC Labels)

While the promises inherent in an FSC Mix certification demonstrate clear intent to respect environmental and conservation efforts, certain language in this list leaves holes that may look small but are easily jumped through. The inclusion of the word “high” in the third point tells us that wood *may* be harvested in areas where low to medium conservation values are threatened, such as in virgin forests. In the fourth point, the phrase “being converted to” only promises that trees were not harvested in the intentional act to deforest a natural area. However, trees could be harvested from established paper plantations.

What is the problem with paper plantations? True to the Patagonia philosophy, Olson asks: “Why cut down a tree at all?” As she states in a 2017 IBPA article she wrote, research by the Green Press Initiative found in 2016 that deforestation accounted for 25% of carbon emissions globally (Olson 2017). Planting trees has become the project focus of many environmental groups and other businesses working to offset carbon emissions and thus lower the rate of global warming. Olson adds, about paper plantations:

When you grow trees specifically to cut them down, you’re replacing natural habitat with conventional farming, which has all kinds of eco effects—including the disruption of biodiversity. Basically, anytime you’re replacing natural habitat with something that is not natural, that’s a bad thing. And there’s tons of paper in the world that’s going into the

landfill. Why not deflect it from the landfill? Patagonia has done studies from as long as 20 years ago that show when you calculate all the eco-effects of making paper from a paper plantation, the cost of the fossil fuel to collect recycled paper and scrub it is not as high as the impact of everything else.

The Forest Stewardship Council manages many forest-related systems, the wood-chain for paper production being just one of them. They have a strong mission: *FSC will promote environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable management of the world's forests*, which communicates to businesses their commitment to the triple-bottom-line (FSC). However, in considering an FSC certification for paper, printers and publishers need to separate the mission and values of FSC from the promised product received with the label. It is ultimately up to each publisher to educate themselves and decide independently how an environmental label fits with their mission and values.

For publishers, the key to getting PCW paper for your books is to find the right printer or paper broker. In the next section, I will discuss the power of good partnerships in publishing using the example of Patagonia and their relationship with the Canadian printing company Friesens.

Partnerships

One of the reasons the book industry takes a long time to pivot in any given area is because there are many stakeholders in the process, each pursuing their own version of mission-fulfillment and success. Olson recognizes in her 2017 IBPA article that especially for independent publishers, the learning curve in book production can be steep and confusing: “Without a big production department behind you, it is difficult to keep up with the industry jargon and developments and feel like you are getting a straight answer. And if you, like many independent publishers, wish to include sustainability practices, your choices get even more confusing” (Olson 2017). The reason straight answers may be difficult to get from a printer is that paper makes up the major resource of their business, and the sales department may be working to move certain types of paper to increase their economic success—this does not make them the enemy any more than a publisher should be vilified for focusing more marketing attention on certain books at certain times. However, in order for a publisher to meet their own standards of success, strong communication and persistence may be required until a mutually beneficial relationship is established.

As a pioneer in eco-publishing, Olson has communicated with multiple printers about the environmental value of PCW paper, and the growing demand for eco-friendly products from both publishers and readers. The best advice she has for obtaining 100% PCW paper from a printer is, “find a printer that is in line with your eco-publishing goals.” Further, she explains: “Usually what this means is that they have a standard house paper that’s 100% post-consumer waste recycled. They have it on the floor and supply it all the time.” Having the paper in stock is an important factor in keeping the price down. If publishers ask a printer for PCW paper, but the paper needs to be ordered first, the paper mill will have a minimum quantity for the order. In many cases, that cost will get passed on to the publisher even if their print run uses less than half of the order—causing the price per copy to skyrocket. One way around the issue is to find a print broker who can help you purchase the PCW paper you want directly; then, if your printer allows it, you can supply the paper for the print job yourself. Patagonia Books has experimented with both routes to combat the financial barrier to using eco-papers. Searching for a printer in line with their eco-goals resulted in one of their most beneficial partnerships for making books.

Friesens printing company, based in Manitoba, Canada, carries 100% PCW options made by the paper manufacturer Rolland. Both Friesens and Rolland have made a commitment to the environment part of their business missions, which ticks important value boxes for Patagonia, literally. “We have a checklist for any outside manufacturer we work with that rigorously checks certain aspects of the business. That’s Patagonia-wide,” says Olson. Friesens also matched Patagonia in the category of social values—they are employee-owned and take action to employ a diverse workforce at a fair wage. While this aspect of good partnerships in publishing is strongly related to mission-driven business and the environmental and social goals of a company are often complementary, it is important to articulate the goals of each type of value clearly, and to back them up with actionable goals—such as, “We print on PCW paper only.”

Understandably, many of these recommendations take extra time and/or money to truly follow-through with. Therefore, those who put in the work will want to see their return on investment. While time may not technically be recoverable, the benefits of product quality, employee retention, profit, and audience loyalty are among the best returns possible when publishers commit to eco-practices.

Branding and Audience

We’ve established that giving attention to both the content and production of your books will infuse a publisher’s brand with the authenticity that readers—particularly the younger generations—will both pay more for and respect. In Karla Olson’s 2017 article for the IBPA titled “Even a Small Publisher Can Print Sustainably,” she cites the Natural Marketing Institute’s survey data results from 2015: “85 percent of the US population values sustainability practices, and 63 percent consider sustainability in their buying decisions. I’m going to guess that these percentages are even higher for book buyers” (Olson 2017). So, to go back to the question of return on investment, how can a publisher ensure their return on eco-publishing practices at least equate to their investment? Olson addresses this common financial concern:

The number one reason that I hear many publishers say that they don’t want to use recycled paper is because it costs too much. But the reality is if we demand more, it won’t cost that much more. And if you need to, you can pass the cost on, which isn’t usually more than a dollar a copy. You can pass that on in the price of the book and make it part of your brand . . . Like Chelsea Green, their books might cost a dollar more, but people respect that because they know that they are living up to their mission and the focus of their books.

Change can come at a price, but publishers don’t have to do it alone. By following Olson’s advice to include all stakeholders in the book industry in this movement towards environmentally sustainable business, publishers can take on a leadership role that both consumers and stakeholders will respect. One challenge in the book industry that has already been discussed to an extent is the fact that *content* tends to lead over *material* in perception of the final product. While book-buyers often appreciate a great cover design or the material feel of a book, fewer people are likely to be caught smelling a book, holding the paper an inch from their eyes, or feeling the texture of the paper between their thumb and forefinger. However, eco-publishers can still reach all book buyers by communicating their brand in an obvious place—in the book! Write an environmental statement about your publishing house’s production choices and include it consistently in the front matter of every book. Ask your printer, as Olson does, to include an environmental audit declaring the quantity of trees, water, greenhouse

gases, energy, and waste were saved compared to standard production methods—these audits are often easy for printers to generate through the Environmental Paper Network. In generating standard environmental branding that communicates your brand to consumers, the growing audience of value-driven readers and consumers will take notice and show up in support of your business goals by buying your books and talking about your press. Recent movements amidst the economic pressures of COVID-19 on the book industry encourage readers to buy from outlets like IndieBound.org and Bookshop.org instead of Amazon, and to use the social media hashtag #ReadIndie to encourage support of indie publishers over the “Big Five” publishing giants (NYC-based publishers owned by overseas media corporations). Examples like this show that the world is increasingly ready to prioritize good business over cheaper products (Sutherland, 2020).

A final point worth noting is that Patagonia is a certified Benefit Corporation (B Corps), which is a powerful third-party validation that helps businesses prove their trust and value (B Corps Declaration). The Environment is one of five core areas that businesses are evaluated on in order to become certified, meaning the 2,500+ businesses across 150 industries and 60 countries form a community committed to benefiting the environment as an additional stakeholder in their businesses (“Certified B Corporation”). The [B Corps website](#) is a rich resource of information on how to build a B Corps business model and includes a user-friendly directory of all the B Corps members and their B Impact scores (reflective of their performance across the core areas of assessment). Some publishers, such as Chelsea Green and Gibbs Smith, have succeeded in communicating their missions and running profitable business without the certification of the B Corps group. However, newer presses might consider pursuing the new B Corps Pending status that was created specifically for new businesses that are interested in mentorship from other B Corps as they work to establish their credibility for certification. Again, this option may not be right for all publishers, but having that B Corps label could be a powerful branding tool as younger readers become familiar with what signifies value, and then become the core audience of the book industry.

Conclusion

The reality of climate change science puts everyone in the hot seat because the future of human life on earth is at stake, and these young leaders for environmental action are not about to forget it. In fact, they are the ones that will be buying, or not buying, future products and services. They will be the ones looking for work in the businesses they support and admire, and starting their own businesses when they don’t see change happening fast enough. Coming out of the hardships they experience as young people during COVID-19 and the recession to follow, adaptability and resilience will form their origin story. The question to any business who aims to serve the current and future communities of our world is: will you work to meet the expectations of those communities in your business planning?

Further interdisciplinary research (and frequent updates to that research) is still needed to gather hard statistics about the combined environmental impact of all the industries involved in making books: paper mills, printers, authors, publishers, distributors, retailers, and book-buyers. This information would provide all stakeholders with a unified picture of the book industry’s interaction with the environment. However, through my case study interview with Karla Olson about her leadership of the eco-publisher Patagonia, combined with the interdisciplinary research of the state of the environment and its movements, I can offer three categorical reasons why a publishing house should become an eco-publisher:

1. *Moral grounds*—the earth’s environment is deteriorating, and the book industry should try to do more healing and less harm in whatever way they can.
2. *Market demands*—the modern and future reading audiences will continue to demand evidence of eco-business practices to match their own environmental values; being a business ahead of this trend will be a distinguishing factor.
3. *Business Sustainability*—climate change is a scientific reality that will continue to challenge the norms and available resources in every industry, including publishing; therefore, working to protect the triple-bottom line (environment, economy, and society) is the best way to safeguard one’s business for the future (Tian and Martin).

Finally, Olson and I discussed the future of print books in general. While the debate between the environmental benefits of digital versus print publishing continues—and interdisciplinary research in this area is sorely needed—the fact remains that print books are beloved by humans for a reason that digital ebooks and audiobooks cannot replace. Olson points out that ebooks continue to sell only 25-30% compared to print, so a business is not going to be profitable if they cut out over half of their readers. Print books offer a tactile experience that an increasingly digitized world will likely increase the need for—consider the surprising increase in purchases of jigsaw puzzles in this pandemic environment.

As Olson concludes: “I don’t think print books have gone away. And so, we have to make the manufacturing the best we can.” Ultimately, this is more than a moral call to action; it is an opportunity for businesses to choose growth over stagnancy and to meet the needs of a changing world. ∞

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