

# *Broadening the Green Horizon*

By David Mahood

I get asked most about how I became interested in issues related to the environment. I can't actually remember when but about a decade ago I read an article in National Geographic, a groundbreaking article about sea turtles. I had no idea how fragile their existence was in nature. It was alarming. I long wondered of these mysterious prehistoric creatures that lay their many eggs on the shore every other year. *How could they be endangered? Isn't there enough sand and water to go around, I thought?* That day launched Olive Designs years later. I just didn't know it then. I am now, what I didn't self-diagnose before, a biophilic. There is neither medication nor treatment for my illness. I have an innate love for our fellow species, which is the main symptom of my illness. When I formed Olive Designs in 1997, I knew I would have to reconcile my biophilia with my new business in the contract furniture market. Olive Designs was named after the smallest of the sea turtle species, the olive ridleys. My first call I made was not to a designer, manufacturer, salesperson, or industry consultant; it was to the US Fish and Wildlife Services. Every Olive Designs order makes a donation to the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Hospital in Topsail Beach, North Carolina.

It was a quote: *the loss of biodiversity is the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us* that helped me broaden my green horizon. It was both poetic and startling. As manufacturers we have a responsibility to maintain an ecological balance, as consumers we have the right to demand that. What we make should forever be our responsibility. How we leave our habitat after we have produced goods is more important to the next generation than our own. The insatiable appetite for natural resources has imperiled close to a third of our species, including sea turtles. Any farmer can tell you that the more diverse a field, the more robust and healthy. Any biologist can tell you that the more species in existence in a habitat the more productive and stable the environment. Without one type of the willow tree, we may never have discovered aspirin; without the Pacific yew tree, we may never have discovered Taxol-used to treat ovarian and breast cancer patients. Without wild yams found in Mexico we may never have developed contraceptives; without the leaves of the purple foxglove plant we may never have discovered Digitalis, which is used to treat congestive heart failure and other cardiac ailments. Finally, without those strikingly beautiful and much endangered poison dart frogs living in the environmental hotspots of Central and South America, we would not have discovered ABT-594, a non-addictive opiate that suppresses pain, including pain associated with nerve damage, without sleepiness.

I feel the burden of preserving the natural splendor. We should no longer make items that have no long-term active life. One only has to look once at a sea turtle corpse with a plastic bag lodged in its digestive tract, which is surprisingly commonplace because their favorite food are jellyfish, to know that we must make less easily discarded goods. One only has to look at the ecological devastation of 10.8 million gallons of oil spilling

into the Prince William Sound to know that we must seek more eco-friendly alternatives to our current product dependency. We are paying environmentally for the effects of the Industrial Revolution. We failed to broaden the “green” horizon by disjoining ecology and technology. Just consider wondrous inventions of the twentieth century like DDT, Styrofoam, CFC’s, rubber tires, and warhead plutonium, inventions that our future generations will have to contend with, reluctantly. Olive Designs is the face of a new generation of manufacturers. Olive Designs uses recycled foam, plastics, rubber tires, glass, boiler tubes from the great state of South Carolina; we use plantation maple, 100% industrial hemp fabrics, tree-free wheat-board and Meadowood, and salvage clear glass tops, which are cut out from leftovers. Very basically, if it can be reused, then it should.

So today, I hope to help you broaden your green horizon. Remember that we all share one habitat. Your presence here today indicates to me that you do care about that. And it doesn’t have to be confusing. I found out most of what I know from reading but also from asking. When you evaluate products, ask what they’re made of and how they can be made more earth-friendly and how long will they last. Ask them to investigate their policy on disposal of products. And finally, ask them what commitments and associations they make. You have the right to know. If they won’t disclose the information you seek, you have the decision-making power to go elsewhere. Many of you don’t get a chance to work on a “green” project very often. Well, why not? Just because your client isn’t requesting it, does that mean that you can’t reconcile your own “green” interests? Would a client berate you for doing something good for our earth? I applaud you all for taking an interest. One “green” deed spawns another. Thank you.

**David Mahood, 2002**