

REthinking

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How does PET fare as an ecological material and as an alternative to wool?

As part of the global effort to address the issue of plastic pollution, products made of polyethylene terephthalate or PET are becoming more commonplace in the interiors market. Denna Jones talks to London’s Matthew Wailes and Jennifer Manners about what PET rugs can offer



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01 Upcycled *Nautilus* rug, LuxuryEco Collection, Matthew Wailes

02 Upcycled handwoven flatweave, LuxuryEco Collection, Matthew Wailes

03 *Malibu* rug, /Re/ PURPOSE Collection, Jennifer Manners

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For god’s sake use stuff more than once!

Matthew Wailes

‘For god’s sake use stuff more than once!’ Matthew Wailes’ impassioned comment is delivered with a smile to soften his verbal delivery, but he voices the frustrations of millions. His new LuxuryEco rug collection, woven from upcycled PET yarn, is his contribution to tackling the glut of single-use PET bottles polluting our oceans.

Trading as Matthew Wailes (London), Wailes has been in the bespoke rug design business for more than a quarter century. Frustrated by insufficient government and corporate action to tackle waste and pollution—‘the burden shouldn’t be on small companies like ours!’—and spurred by the global emergency of plastic pollution, Wailes is upcycling discarded PET bottles into luxury rugs. Wailes is not alone. His LuxuryEco collection is joined by British rug designer Jennifer Manners’ hand-knotted plush-pile PET /Re/PURPOSE collection and The Knot Collective’s Zero Edition PET rugs (see COVER 56). Wailes is also a prophet of change whose overriding objective goes beyond selling PET rugs. Yes, he is dedicated to raising awareness of the single-use plastic problem, but his ultimate goal is eradicating ocean-waste PET bottles as a source material for rug making.

PET (polyethylene terephthalate—a petroleum-based polyester) is the constituent material of single-use plastic bottles. Wailes’ LuxuryEco collection uses recovered PET yarn with a soft, silk-like handle. Features of PET yarn include inherent stain, water, and flame resistance (key selling points for the non-luxury EverStrand PET carpet made by major US rug retailer Mohawk). Wailes’ LuxuryEco collection features five designs, but clients can choose PET fibre for any rug in his hand-tufted, hand-loomed and flatwoven rug collections, a choice Wailes actively promotes.

The genesis of Wailes’ LuxuryEco collection was ‘Upcycling the Oceans Thailand’ launched in 2017 as a joint initiative of The Tourism Authority of Thailand, PTT Global Chemical, and the Ecoalf Foundation. The focus is education, clean-up, recovery, and research into and production of upcycled PET products. Wailes and his Thai partner—Carpet Maker (Thailand)—are

beneficiaries of the initiative’s R&D outcomes for PET recovery. Wailes launched his LuxuryEco collection at Decorex London in October 2019, and Carpet Maker (Thailand) simultaneously launched their collections at a Bangkok eco conference.

Wailes’ plea to ‘use stuff more than once’ is allied to a wider movement to end fast fashion. Throw-away culture and planned obsolescence (i.e. products designed to fail) are threats to the environment. ‘One of these [PET] rugs will last for generations,’ says Manners. ‘The sustainable aspect comes not only from the fact the rugs are crafted from recycled materials but also their durability as a product.’ For both Manners and Wailes, the ultimate sustainable feature of luxury PET rugs is the appeal of the handmade. Customers need to equate artisan value and superlative design to luxury PET rugs to help ensure they are valued and retained.

But what happens when PET rugs are discarded? Low oil (a key component of PET) prices slash financial incentives to recycle while diverse materials and construction complicate recovery. While it’s theoretically true that upcycled PET rug fibres can be endlessly recycled without quality degradation, reality differs. ‘I’m unaware of any UK facility that takes upcycled PET rugs,’ says Wailes before he adds the gloomy fact that most are burned or buried. Mono-material rugs are one answer. Unbacked handwoven single-fibre rugs of any description are easier to deconstruct and recycle. Wailes’ LuxuryEco collection includes mono-fibre PET rugs, but the fact remains there are not enough PET-recycling facilities. Perhaps the answer will be facilities that utilise a newly identified bacterium that digests PET through enzyme secretion.

Wailes’ ultimate objective is two-fold. To create luxury rugs that repay labour intensive efforts to remove PET plastic bottles from beaches and oceans, and to challenge consumers, manufacturers and governments to abandon single-use PET plastics. There will be no market for upcycled PET rugs if there are no more bottles in the ocean. Until such time however, luxury rug designers like Matthew Wailes will continue to support the reclamation of PET bottles from our oceans to create luxurious rugs that will remind us daily to tread gently on this fragile planet.

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