



# NATURAL Beauty

**I**n March this year, French cosmetics giant L'Oreal completed its US\$1.25 billion purchase of the Body Shop. With sales of US\$17 billion a year, L'Oreal isn't short of a buck or two. But if they're willing to bet over a billion dollars on a relatively small company whose reputation is founded on its sales of natural and ethically-produced cosmetics, somebody must have done their homework. They did, and what it told them was that natural and Fair Trade cosmetic products are a trend of the future.

Undoubtedly they were right. Against steady, but less than stellar, annual growth of 5% in the global cosmetics market, the increase in the market for Fair Trade and organic cosmetics is predicted to reach a staggering 80% in the next year. It may still be a very small proportion of the overall market, but its upward growth curve shows no signs of flattening out any time soon. Ethical consumerism, long considered the preserve of a few flakey liberals, has moved well and truly into the mainstream.

One of the most obvious manifestations of this surge in the numbers of ethical consumers has been the rising chorus of popular support in Europe for more equitable terms of trade with developing countries. Under the banner of "Trade not Aid", consumers have recognised that personal spending patterns potentially have a far greater impact than any amount of well-intentioned aid programmes. The 1% of their annual income that many Europeans give to charity may have some benefit, but the way they spend the other 99% is surely more significant.

The organic movement, which has followed a similar growth trajectory to that of ethical consumerism, was initially driven by different motivations. It emanated in the 1970s from the conservation lobby, who were starting to witness ecological impacts from the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers. It gained momentum in the '80s when health practitioners began questioning the wisdom of eating vegetables that had been drenched in chemicals. But it really took off in the '90s when consumers realised that organically-grown food actually tastes better. Today there is hardly a supermarket in Europe that doesn't stock organic produce.

Now these two parallel market trends are converging. The profiles of "green" and ethical consumers are sufficiently similar that many market researchers no longer bother to differentiate them. In a recent survey in the UK, consumers who described themselves as "green" were three times more likely than other consumers to also describe themselves as "ethical".

Just as the numbers of consumers in this market are growing, so too are the range of products that fall within its sphere. Both organic and Fair Trade consumption started out in the food sector, but they are spreading rapidly, and nowhere more so than in the cosmetics and personal care sectors.

Although at a more embryonic stage, these trends are also becoming apparent at home in South Africa. The demand for products that have been formally certified as organic or Fair Trade may still be very small, but there has been a proliferation of products on the shelves that describe themselves as "natural", itself a reliable indicator of the emerging trend.

An intriguing feature of the growth in the South African market for green and ethical cosmetics is the number of new products and ingredients derived from African plants. Researchers have long acknowledged the wealth of traditional knowledge surrounding African plants and their historical uses for medicinal and cosmetic purposes. Recently, there has been a con-







certed effort by the scientific community to substantiate the efficacy of these plants. The results, in many cases, have been remarkable

Take, for example, the marula tree, found in abundance throughout the lowveld and already an ingredient in one of South Africa's most successful alcoholic beverages. Ethnobotanists in Namibia noted that the oil from its seed, in addition to being a popular local culinary oil, was traditionally used to preserve meat in areas where refrigeration is not an option. Surmising that this must be a result of its ability to slow the oxidation process, they began exploring its anti-oxidant properties. Sure enough, they found it to be one of the most stable and powerful natural anti-oxidants known to science. Now it is being incorporated into anti-ageing skin-care products by cosmetics companies around the world.

Then there's the African sausage tree (*Kigelia africana*). Known by many for its efficacy in treating a variety of skin ailments, particularly those related to skin cancer, recent research has validated its anti-inflammatory, anti-oxidant

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and anti-bacterial properties. Growing numbers of users bear testimony to its effectiveness in treating and preventing acne, psoriasis, eczema and similar problems, and it is only a matter of time before kigelia extracts begin making their way into mainstream cosmetic products.

In recognition of these market trends, in 2001 a group of far-sighted producers established a trade association to support the development of an ethical and environmentally sustainable natural products industry in Southern Africa. Calling themselves PhytoTrade Africa (the Southern African Natural Products Trade Association), this non-profit Association has since grown to incorporate over 50 members from across the region.

PhytoTrade Africa's aim is to unlock the potential for native African species to generate meaningful, long-term income opportunities for disadvantaged rural producers and harvesters. At the same time, they seek to create tangible incentives for rural people to invest in the sustainable management of their plant resources.

The results so far have been impressive. Eight new products have been launched and a further twelve are currently under development. Nearly 10,000 low-income producers have been brought into the supply chain, and their

numbers are rising daily. The Association has developed strategic partnerships with cosmetic and functional food manufacturers in South Africa, Europe and North America. They have their own market development office in the UK to service the EU market, and represent African producers at trade shows and events around the world.

One especially encouraging output of their work has been the development of innovative approaches to benefit-sharing around the intellectual property associated with African plants. Recently the Association launched a newly patented product in conjunction with Aldivia, a high-tech French company involved in botanical actives. This product, called Maruline, is a derivative of marula oil that concentrates the anti-oxidant properties of marula oil to make them even stronger and more readily useable within the cosmetics industry. The patent is jointly owned by both parties, representing the first time globally that a patent has been shared between the primary producers in a developing country and the technology supplier in a developed country.

PhytoTrade Africa has also been at the forefront of efforts to develop certification mechanisms that can provide consumers with absolute confidence that the products they buy really have been ethically and sustainably produced. Current international organic and Fair Trade standards do not adequately cover the needs of rural African producers, and PhytoTrade has joined forces with the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and other players to adapt and modify existing standards to make them more locally appropriate.

L'Oréal may be the first big cosmetics company to move into the arena of green and ethical cosmetics, but they certainly won't be the last. In marketing terms, the Body Shop is a phenomenon. They have been consistently polled by consumers in the UK as one of the top 10 most widely recognised brands, up there with the likes of Coca Cola, Ford, Nike and others. Yet their turnover doesn't even place them in the top 500 biggest UK companies. Why? Because their branding and their corporate values resonate with consumers in a way that few others can achieve. People like the idea of putting ethically and sustainably produced natural products on their skin.

It may have started as a small niche, but the market for ethical natural cosmetics is set to grow and grow. For African producers, and for African consumers, this is good news. We'll get to use our own products, developed from our own plants and using our own cultural traditions. Moreover, we'll know that, in doing so, we're benefiting our own people and our own environment.

*For more information on PhytoTrade Africa, contact Lucy Welford on [lucy@phytotradeafrica.com](mailto:lucy@phytotradeafrica.com), or visit their website on [www.phytotradeafrica.com](http://www.phytotradeafrica.com). PhytoTrade Africa is a Section 21 Company (Association Incorporated Not For Gain).*

