SME CASE STUDY VIGNETTE

NO. 8

PAPILLON BLEU

https://papillonbleu.com/

01 | Introduction

Papillon Bleu was founded in 2006 by Vanessa Barker. The business started out as a ready-to-wear label with a commitment to 100% natural fibre, revival of ancient craft techniques, embroideries and block printing, and fair trade, to ensure that workers in the supply chain receive an income they can live on. In 2012, the company pivoted its business to enabling other brands incorporate Papillon Bleu's value systems into their collections by helping them to source and run their production, and find the most sustainable fabrics possible. As part of this, Papillon Bleu's founder built a large sustainable fabric library with the aim to bring the company's clients along on the story of sustainability.

The quest for sustainable fabrics led the founder to regenerative agriculture and textiles, which she sees as the best way to reverse climate change. She has created a successful fully traceable, regenerative cotton programme in Southern India, which is about regenerating land through organic textiles, and about supporting female farmers. This programme engages in practices (which will be described below) that avoids the negative effects of conventional cotton growing such as extensive water use, pollution and soil degradation.

In 2022, Papillon Bleu started a new venture focusing on growing hemp in Leicestershire in the UK to replicate the nature-positive practices of its regenerative cotton programme. The founder regards the UK as a good place to cultivate this alternative fibre, which is fast-growing, needs less water and is a versatile material that can be used both for textiles and building materials. This new venture started small – on five acres – but has now grown to 20 acres, and it is looking to expand by bringing farmers on board. In 2024, Papillon Bleu launched its first hemp-blend fabric at Milan Design Week, which is a blend of hemp with post-consumer cashmere waste for interiors.

Photo credits: Papillon Bleu

02 | Good practice and environmental reporting

Papillon Bleu works in partnership with Raddis Cotton and GVK Society to ensure the best environmental and social practices in its regenerative cotton programme.

The programme works exclusively with small scale tribal farmers, paying a 10-15% premium on market price, and non-GMO cotton-seeds are provided to the farmers at zero interest. Crops are only

grown once a year to ensure that they are entirely rain-fed, making use of the monsoon season. The farms do not use any pesticides and herbicides (thus saving the farmers money), engage in multi-cropping (that is, food crops such as chia seeds, chillies and aubergines are also planted on the land, providing the farmer with food and/or additional income as well as improving soil health), and zero-tilling (to avoid soil erosion).

Papillon Bleu provides a range of metrics to evidence its programme's positive environmental impact. For example, in 2023 the regenerative cotton programme led to a 281 million litre water reduction, 28 kg of toxic herbicides and insecticides were removed, as well as 15.6 tons of chemical fertilisers. Papillon Bleu also reports on the substantial carbon reduction achieved through the programme, with 450 tons of CO_2 having been taken from the atmosphere and 25 tons of CO_2 having been stored in the soil in 2023 annual report. This carbon sequestration also offers additional income opportunities to the farmers from carbon markets in addition to revenue from additional crops grown.

Papillon Bleu offers full traceability to its clients through QR code enabled digital passports, which shows the complete journey from seed to sawn garment. This does not just evidence the environmental credentials but also helps demonstrate that no modern-day slave labour exists in Papillon Bleu's works to the most stringent of industry standards working conditions and wages, that no modern-day slave labour exists in this food and fiber cotton eco-system and value chain.

Papillon Bleu seeks to replicate the nature-positive approach of its cotton programme for its new venture of growing hemp in the UK. The hemp crop is also 100% rain-fed (which the climate in the UK lends itself to), leading to a reduction of the water footprint. It is cultivated using multi-cropping/crop-rotating practices as well as no tilling, and all seeds are non GMO. Papillon Bleu's founder especially emphasises the substantial carbon sequestration potential of hemp (which will provide additional income opportunities for UK farmers) and soil-regenerating and biodiversity enhancing capabilities of the hemp plant.

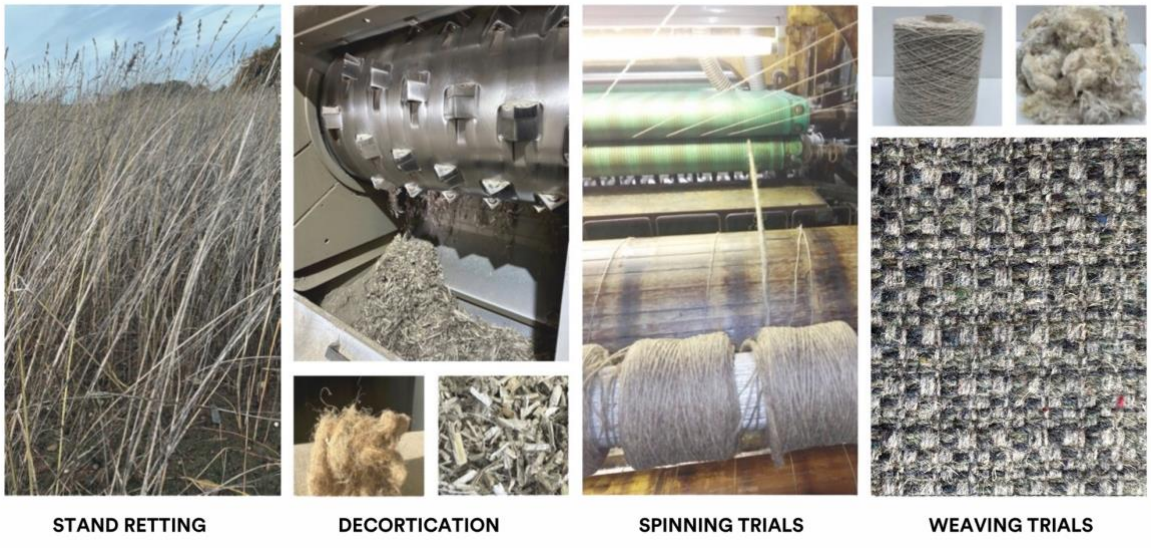

Photo credits: Papillon Bleu

03 | External Financing

Papillon Bleu has kick-started the hemp project with self-funding, as the founder used her own farm to grow the hemp trials to carry out R & D. The company has also received a grant from the EU WORTH Partnership Project, which – in collaboration with the University Politecnico di Torino in Italy – has enabled a value mapping exercise as well as the promotion of the project at Milan Design Week in 2024. Papillon Bleu has also teamed up with DeMontfort University in Leicester, a local university that has a lot of experience of bast fibre R&D, to apply for grants to develop the project.

In line with her vision to grow the production of regenerative textiles globally (see next section), Papillon Bleu's founder looks to works with international farmers internationally, including a partner in Romania who also looks to grow hemp for fibre. This partner has received a substantial experience in hemp cultivation and with 2,000 hectares of land available to grow hemp, the limitations arise from the necessity to buy hemp processing machinery and install locally, an example of how more growing of regenerative fibres could be supported by connecting with national financial infrastructures.

04 | Future Plans

Papillon Bleu's vision for the next ten years is "to have 100,000 hectares of land regeneratively worldwide being grown, whether regenerative cotton or hemp". The founder specifically regards her hemp project as an opportunity for a UK grown green fibre and reshoring. She plans to roll the project out to other farms and build the entire value chain in the UK from growing to processing (decorticating – spinning -weaving) to finding clothing manufacturers and brands interested in UK grown hemp-blend fabrics, and to do this at scale at the right price point. The challenge lies in the fact that infrastructure for textile production has been diminished in the UK in the past few decades and there are only few processing facilities left. For example, there are only three decorticating facilities left in the UK; Papillon Bleu has access to one with near distance to the farm in Leicestershire, where the hemp project was started. There also only remain very few spinning facilities. To rebuild that infrastructure would require government support and infrastructure investment. This would also include encouraging farmers to make the switch from conventional to regenerative farming, and to review hemp licensing rules, as currently hemp growers need a licence from the Home Office, despite negligible THC content in industrial hemp plants. At the same time, growing a green textile such as regenerative hemp, would help meet the UK government's 'net-zero' target due to the huge carbon-sequestration potential of hemp, and also have positive biodiversity impacts. As part of this, carbon credits could serve as additional income for farmers seeking to grow regenerative fibres.

ABOUT

Funded by the Natural Environment Research Council, our case study series sheds light on early-stage SMEs journeys in obtaining external financing, SMEs navigating challenges in accessing finance for nature-positive innovation, aligning with environmentally conscious investors through shared metrics, and the evolution of SME investors in becoming 'nature-positive'. For further details, please see www.cusp.ac.uk/sme-finbio.

Middlesex University London
UKRI Natural Environment Research Council