

Bagful of waste

Delhi-based NGO **Conserve** turns waste plastic bags into fashionable handbags and accessories with its innovative recycling process

Photographs: Conserve

Who would have ever thought that the polythene bags you discarded could one day become raw material for a funky handbag? With some ingenuity and a fresh look at regular problems, such thoughts are not impossible as Conserve has demonstrated with its hugely successful recycling model.

Established in 1998 by Anita and Shaleb Ahuja, Conserve has worked in the areas of energy efficiency and waste management with a pioneering role. But it was in 2002 that they really got into the process of developing an eco-entrepreneurship program to tackle the twin problems of urban waste and urban poverty.

The solution? An alternative recycling process that uses freely available waste plastic bags as a resource for income generation for the urban poor through conversion into a "renewed" material. This material, which they call HRP (Handmade Recycled Plastic), is then used to make a wide range of products with great market



appeal—from colourful handbags and cushion covers to waste paper baskets and table mats.

Conserve claims that this is an eco friendly process. Compared to the conventional recycling process, it uses much less energy and causes no pollution. It also helps reduce the environmental problems caused by plastics.

This initiative also tackles the issue of urban poverty as it provides a potential income stream for the rag-picking

community. Conserve has trained these groups in collecting, sorting and grading of plastic that is then bought by the NGO at remunerative prices for use in making HRP. Currently, around 300 persons are employed, directly and indirectly.

Financially profitable, socially equitable and environmentally sound, Conserve's eco-entrepreneurship model scores high on the sustainability quotient. ■

HOW IT WORKS

Rag-picking

Plastic rags are collected, washed, dried and separated by colour, by a group of people supported by Conserve. Conserve buys these sorted rags at a fixed price which is higher than the average market price. A number of families survive on these earnings alone.



Sheet production

The plastic bags then go into a machine designed by Conserve, which presses them into thicker and more durable sheets. No dyes or inks are required. Many colours of waste plastic are combined to achieve the resultant colours. It takes about 60 plastic bags to make one sheet. HRP sheets retain the chemical properties of the polybags that they are made from but acquire new physical properties in terms of colour, texture and feel.



Bags production

The sheets are then cut, lined with cloth and stitched or moulded into various products. The bag production is done by several preferred suppliers who are currently working on the implementation of fair trade principles (IFAT).

Production planning, prototyping, quality control and shipping

Conserve has rented a warehouse in Delhi where they do the prototyping, quality control, packaging and prepare the shipping to Europe. They also have a showroom where they sell their products.

