

Cashmere with a Cause

Helping herders in Mongolia make a fair and living wage

By Sahar Khan



In 2015, Matt Scanlon found himself driving through the Gobi Desert in Mongolia, his Land Cruiser filled to the roof with \$3 million in cash, wrapped in plastic grocery bags.

The money was for the purchase of 40 tons of cashmere from the nomadic herders who live in the country's outer regions, 400 miles from the nearest town. Scanlon, along with friend Diederik Rijsemus, is the cofounder and CEO of Naadam, a New York-based fashion company working to transform the cashmere supply chain by buying directly from the herders and cutting out unregulated middlemen who inflate prices for consumers and lower profits for the herders.

Three years earlier, the friends had spent a few weeks in the area and learned that many herders were giving up their ancient way of life to seek higher-paying jobs in cities. Scanlon realized he could market the cashmere at a lower price while paying the herders a higher wage. "We recognized that the only way to change their economic circumstances would be to remove the unregulated traders who fixed prices around the world," Scanlon says.



The herders harvest the material from the Zalaa Jinst White goat, which produces the world's rarest raw cashmere. As the only pure white breed in Mongolia, the animals' strands never need to be bleached. This dramatically decreases the company's environmental impact, as fiber-dyeing processes are some of the most harmful to the environment. The herders use 2,000-year-old nomadic methods of hand-combing to gather the hairs, also a more humane way of harvesting the fibers. The animals' hair grows longer than average, due to the harsh winters in the region—temperatures on the steppes can run to minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Longer fibers mean softer cashmere that doesn't pile.

Naadam's in-house design team turns the top-notch cashmere into elegant classic pieces produced at Italian mills. The savings from bypassing the cashmere trade are passed onto Naadam's customers, who find the collection at high-end stores including Saks Fifth Avenue, Nordstrom and Intermix, but at a much lower price than the brand's better-known designer counterparts occupying the same shelf.

A large portion of the sales goes back into the Gobi Revival Fund, a set of microeconomic development programs that Scanlon set up for the herders he works with. The programs support 1,000 nomadic herding families and provide veterinary care to more than 250,000 goats. Scanlon plans to expand Naadam to new fibers and invest in supply-chain development and nonprofits to help change the way the entire fashion industry consumes materials. "I love that I am having an impact," Scanlon says. "I can see the work I do change people's lives." naadamcashmere.com