



Eco-bling

responsible luxury

UNLESS YOU'RE A MOVIE STAR or a celebrity athlete, you'll probably make only a few big jewelry purchases in your lifetime. An engagement, a commemorative anniversary, or the birthday of someone very special—these are the occasions that send us to the jewelry store to ponder the merits of clarity, color, and cut. But what if that dazzling diamond has helped to fund civil wars in Africa, destroying the lives of thousands of people? What if mining the gold to make that wedding band produced multiple tons of waste, laced with arsenic and lead?

For the consumer who cares about sustainability, buying jewelry means navigating a minefield of environmental and social problems, including toxic pollution, hazardous working conditions, child labor, and the displacement of indigenous peoples.

"In the United States, metal mining is the single largest toxic polluter. Metal mining is responsible for 96 percent of arsenic emissions in our country," says jewelry designer Meghan Connolly Haupt. "A single gold ring results in 20 to 30 tons of mine waste, on average. A single diamond results in 100 tons of mine waste."

Haupt's East Bay jewelry business, C5 Company, specializes in creating sustainable jewelry made from recycled metals and gems that are mined with minimal social and environmental impact. Haupt is part of a growing industry that has gained momentum as consumers become more aware of the impacts of their purchases.

by ANN MARIE BROWN

"Most of us will go out of our way to buy organic food, a hybrid vehicle, or solar energy, but few people know about the importance of sustainable jewelry. The social and environmental impacts of metal and gem mining are enormous," says Haupt.

The 2006 film *Blood Diamond* starring Leonardo DiCaprio has been largely responsible for educating the public about the social implications of gemstone mining, particularly in Africa. The film depicted the large role that mining companies and jewelry traders were playing in sustaining the bloodshed and conflicts in Sierra Leone, Angola, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The film has spawned a marketing gimmick: Since its debut, almost every major jeweler now sells diamonds labeled as "conflict-free." But Haupt says, "It's not verified in most cases. There is no proof."

"The movie *Blood Diamond* helped to raise awareness of a single aspect of the problems of the jewelry business—diamonds that are sold to fund armed conflict and illegitimate regimes. But the movie doesn't talk about a multitude of other problems—destruction of habitat, pollution of air and water systems, and the way women and children are treated in the mine business," says Haupt.

Haupt points to the social costs of gem mining in countries like Cambodia and Brazil, where mining communities survive at or below the poverty threshold. Because the miners export the rough, uncut gemstones they mine to other countries for cutting and polishing, their communities receive little compensation for their role in the high-dollar gem business. Despite possessing high-value commodities, many mining communities rarely develop beyond the subsistence level.

"From the time it leaves the ground to the time it reaches the market, a diamond increases in value every step of the way. The processes of cutting and polishing are very important, because they greatly increase the value of a rough gem from the mine. By the time it gets to market, a diamond may be worth \$5,000. But the person who mined

Loose gems from
C5 Company



WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN BUYING JEWELRY

- Buy recycled or vintage gold and gems.
- Ask your local jewelry store to tell you the source of the gold and gems they sell. This will encourage them to offer more environmentally sound and socially just alternatives.
- Consider alternatives to diamonds and sapphires, which are often affiliated with political struggles. Less rare gemstones like rose quartz, chalcedony, peridot, and fire opal are more likely to be conflict-free. Haupt's C5 Company also sells an ethically sourced gem called zultanite, which is mined solely in Turkey by a socially responsible corporation.
- Buy lab-created gemstones, especially diamonds and sapphires.



Silver bangles from Sulusso
Sustainable Jewelry

the stone in his backyard usually gets pennies for it," says Haupt.

The environmental toll from gemstone and metals mining is readily apparent. In the United States, the world's largest open pit mine is found in Bingham Canyon, Utah. Producing copper, gold, silver, and molybdenum, the mine measures one mile deep and two-and-a-half miles across. This massive scar on the landscape—a vast hole in the ground—is easily visible from outer space. In Papua, New Guinea, a single gold mine generates 200,000 tons of waste per day, more than all of the cities in Japan, Canada, and Australia combined.

Fortunately, jewelry buyers can make responsible choices. Purchasing "ethically sourced" gemstones and responsibly mined or recycled metals makes it possible to wear jewelry you can feel good about.

Ethically sourced gems are those that are mined from the earth in a minimally invasive manner, and which can be traced through all stages of their lifetime—from their origins in the ground to cutting, polishing, and the market where they are finally sold.

Unfortunately, there is no universally accepted standard for traceability of gemstones. In 2003, an international diamond certification scheme known as the Kimberley Process was initiated in South Africa, with the intent of allowing only "conflict-free" diamonds to be internationally traded. Without any enforcement besides self-regulation, the process has been only marginally effective. According to the Conflict-Free Diamond Council, to be truly "conflict-free," a diamond must be mined, cut, and polished in the same region without crossing any national borders; it must be laser-engraved with a serial number, then scanned and recorded in a confidential, centralized database; and it must pass through a stringent monitoring system in its travels from the mine to the diamond factory. Additionally, all facilities where the diamond is mined, cut, and polished must adhere to global labor laws, ensuring that a fair wage is paid to all workers.

Because stones change hands so many times in their travels from the

mine to the market, their life story can be very difficult to trace. Some diamond retailers attempt to skirt this problem by purchasing diamonds only from Canada, stating that Canadian diamonds are free of the ethical concerns related to African diamonds. Canada is now the third-largest diamond-producing nation in the world. Still, there are serious threats posed by Canadian diamond exploration and mining.

"Consumers have gravitated toward Canadian diamonds because they think they are automatically conflict-free," says Haupt. "That might be true, but if you are sending [the diamonds] to Africa and India for cutting and polishing, you don't know what is going on there. Plus, in Canada there is a lot of concern about the indigenous people who have been marginalized in the process of bringing in diamond mining on their native lands."

Another source of ethically sourced gems are those that are grown in a laboratory. Lab-grown gems include sapphires, rubies, emeralds, alexandrites, and diamonds that are manufactured through a scientific process that replicates nature. These are not "imitation" baubles, like cubic zirconia, but actual gemstones that are identical to, and sometimes more perfect than, their mined counterparts.

"There are only about a half-dozen diamond labs in the world. You won't save money by buying lab-grown, but you can be certain that these diamonds are conflict-free and environmentally responsible," says Haupt.

Grassroots organizations are taking a stand for raising the standards of the jewelry industry. Groups such as No Dirty Gold, Earthwatch, the Conflict Free Diamond Council, and Global Witness have done much to publicize the problems related to metals and gemstone mining and processing. To read more about the complicated issues surrounding gold and gemstone mining, visit nodirtygold.org, conflictfreediamonds.org, earthworksaction.org, or globalwitness.org. ■

Top row: wedding designs from Green Karat. Bottom row: ethically sourced diamonds from Brilliant Earth.



Eco-designers

WHILE MAINSTREAM JEWELERS are better known to most consumers—mostly due to a constant assault of television and radio ads—a few sustainable jewelry companies have found a niche with customers who are concerned about the impacts of their purchases. Meghan Haupt's **C5 Company** (C5company.com) is one of a relatively small group that also includes:

Green Karat in Houston, Texas sells jewelry made of recycled gold, silver, platinum, and titanium along with unaltered and/or synthetic diamonds. The primary metal in every Green Karat design is recycled, and its gems are either created or recycled. Their recycled gold comes from a variety of sources, but most often it is the reincarnation of old jewelry that has sat idle for years in someone's dresser drawer—a broken necklace, the one remaining earring from a pair, or an old high school class ring. To help shoppers offset the price of purchasing recycled jewelry, Green Karat credits buyers who turn over their own "old gold" with 80 to 100 percent of its market value (greenkarat.com).

Based in San Francisco, **Brilliant Earth** is one of the largest of the sustainable jewelry retailers. Its reclaimed metals

come from numerous post-consumer sources, including existing jewelry, industrial-use metals, and electronics components. Every piece the company casts is made with 100 percent recycled and re-refined precious metals. They, too, will gladly accept trade-ins of old gold and platinum from shoppers who buy from their store or website. The company sells primarily diamonds from Canada and colored gemstones, which they believe have been ethically sourced. Brilliant Earth donates five percent of its profits to directly benefit African communities that have been harmed by the diamond industry (brilliantearth.com).

Precious Earth Fine Jewelry in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, creates jewelry using only 100 percent recycled metals and conflict-free diamonds from Namibia. The company's signature is a small green stone that is embedded in every piece of its jewelry. The green gemstone is an imperial chrome diopside, responsibly mined in the frozen lands of northeastern Siberia (preciousearthjewelry.com).

Sulusso Sustainable Jewelry is an online marketplace that features independent eco-jewelry designers. If you are looking for a one-of-a-kind piece, this is a good place to find it (sulusso.com).