

Feature No. 32: Conserve HRP



Conserve HRP exemplifies new environmental trends in India's private-sector by converting trash to treasure. Lower-income employees collect plastic rags from neighborhood streets and press the waste into a thicker, durable material, known as Handmade-Recycled Plastic, used for stylish handbags and accessories. The material can be compared to leather in quality, but produces a wider range of colors without any artificial dyes.

At the heart of this process are the 300 rag-pickers that collect the waste plastic used for the product line. Founders Anita and Shalabh Ahuja started Conserve HRP as an offshoot of their environmental NGO, but take as much pride in the ongoing recycling activities as they take in the sustainable lifestyle provided to their employees. Anita and Shalabh value the connections made with each employee, who come from all over India and even Bangladesh to work with the company. With such a diversified pool of labor, Anita and Shalabh initially had serious language barriers to overcome – the two speak contentedly of their creative solution to this challenge that involved tapping into the only common language among Conserve employees: Bollywood. Each different color of plastic manufactured is named after a famous Bollywood star, an idea that has led to greater communication during the production process and is an example of the innovative spirit driving Conserve HRP.



By tackling the dual problems of waste and poverty, Conserve HRP holds a captive audience among those who buy “fashion with a conscience”. Current sales in 2100 European retail stores indicate a clientele that is willing to pay more for fair-trade products, delivering large profits for a low-cost process. International sales return an approximate 30 percent gross per bag sold and international buyers already demand a higher volume of their existing products. Opportunities abound for Conserve HRP to link up with other retail stores as well as expand their product line. In fact, Conserve has started scaling up production of an interior decoration and stationary line. Conserve has seen a 90 percent increase in turnover every year since 2004.



The activities of Conserve HRP are easily replicable and Anita and Shalabh have received over 100 letters requesting that the recycling project come to their town. The project requires few inputs; the raw material is readily available and the pressing machinery is inexpensive. Anita

and Shalabh hope to expand to other towns and recycle so much plastic that they work themselves out of business, but the ambitious entrepreneurs look forward to the challenge of their work, one waste product at a time.

Written by Rajya Karipineni, World Resources Institute ©2007 – The Rising Ventures Series features articles, announcements and profiles of investors and entrepreneurs related to the theme of innovative small and medium businesses (SMEs) in emerging markets that deliver social and/or environmental benefits. These business models have been identified through the New Ventures (www.new-ventures.org) and Development through Enterprise (www.nextbillion.net) projects. To view other Features in the Series, visit <http://www.new-ventures.org/risingventures>.