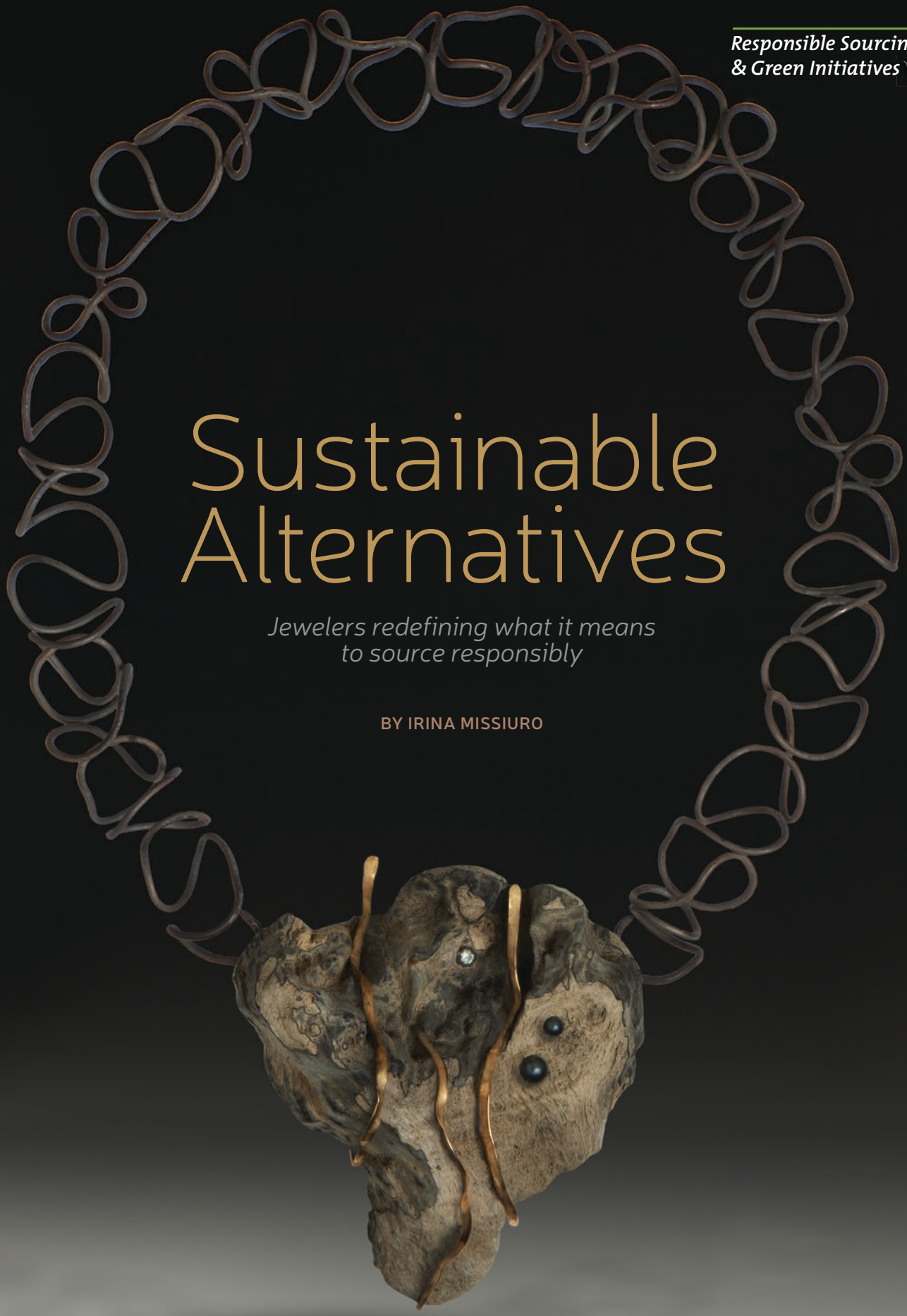
Sustainable Alternatives

Jewelers redefining what it means to source responsibly

BY IRINA MISSIURO



Martin Taber/Black Beach Rock Rings
Beach rocks, Fairmined silver, and diamonds

Martin Taber is happy.

"I am living in a world where people are actively concerned with the ecological approach. I'm free to operate more to my conscience than to the demands of shareholders," says Taber, board president of Ethical Metalsmiths and owner of Taber Studios in Berkeley, California.

His conscience is telling him to create jewelry lines that reflect his dedication to the environment. And Taber's timing is perfect, as more and more consumers have started asking for and demanding sustainable practices from the companies with which they will do business. It's no longer a matter of *if* when it comes to deciding to follow responsible sourcing practices—it's a matter of *when*, especially if you want your business to continue to thrive. But being responsible isn't limited to just using recycled metals and repurposed gemstones. There is a vast array of sustainable materials out there suitable for use in jewelry. We spoke with a few jewelry designers about putting unusual materials to use, and about communicating the reasons behind their choices to their customers.

Taber doesn't cut the natural materials, doesn't set bezels around them. The wood is not oiled—it's tumbled in the surf and sun, enhanced by the organic processes alone.

Alternative Sustainable Choices

Staunch proponents of sustainability first consider their materials and then design according to what available responsible choices they have. Lauren Brown of Blair Lauren Brown Jewelry in New York City is one such artist. "My medium is my message—conservation," she explains. "I use only materials that are going to have a positive impact on our communities and the environment."

True to her word, she designed her first collection around hundred-year-old Alaskan gold nuggets, sourcing them from mines that were family-owned and 20 years old or older. As she seeks to include other materials from sources that comply with the stringent U.S. Environmental Protection Agency standards, she's unwilling to settle for anything less than complete transparency so she can verify the

origin. “Thus, my material options are quite limited,” she admits.

In addition to the raw Alaskan gold nuggets she uses as embellishments and centerpieces in her work, she includes other unorthodox materials, such as salmon skin, in her collections. Brown began using the skin in her designs after receiving a shipment from a native organization faced with an extra supply following the closure of tanneries. Besides contributing to the Alaskan story she likes her work to tell, it serves a practical purpose as a stand-in for leather. Brown employs the skin in rounded trim, strips, braids, and leather cords.

April Hale of April Hale Jewelry in Bozeman, Montana, also embraces the

Martin Taber/Kelp Forest Choker
FAirmined silver, Fairmined 18k gold, Fairtrade sapphires, and recycled diamonds

April Hale/Furball Rings
Raccoon, rabbit, opossum, and squirrel fur

concept of incorporating unconventional, but sustainable, materials. Her early work featured roadkill parts. Hale would skin the animals and use their teeth and fur in jewelry. Now, she strives to make her jewelry with 80 to 99 percent reclaimed or recycled material, often incorporating many unlikely elements in her work. For instance, an old wheelbarrow or a pipe from a wooden stove serve as steel sources. Nothing goes to waste—even roofing copper and fencing wire are transformed.

Besides her main line of jewelry, Hale designs a conceptual one that features only found materials—those that have been discarded. She finds them mostly on walks through the woods. After all, who can ignore a pile of rusted metal? The artist who knows that the steel will look beautiful once the oxidation is cleaned off.

Because she converts the found objects into beautiful creations, some customers question the fact that she works with reclaimed materials. She likes to change their perception of what "precious" is by describing the history of metal, and what labor was involved to alter it. "Once I explain, they appreciate causing a lower impact on the environment, and say, 'I like it even more now.'"

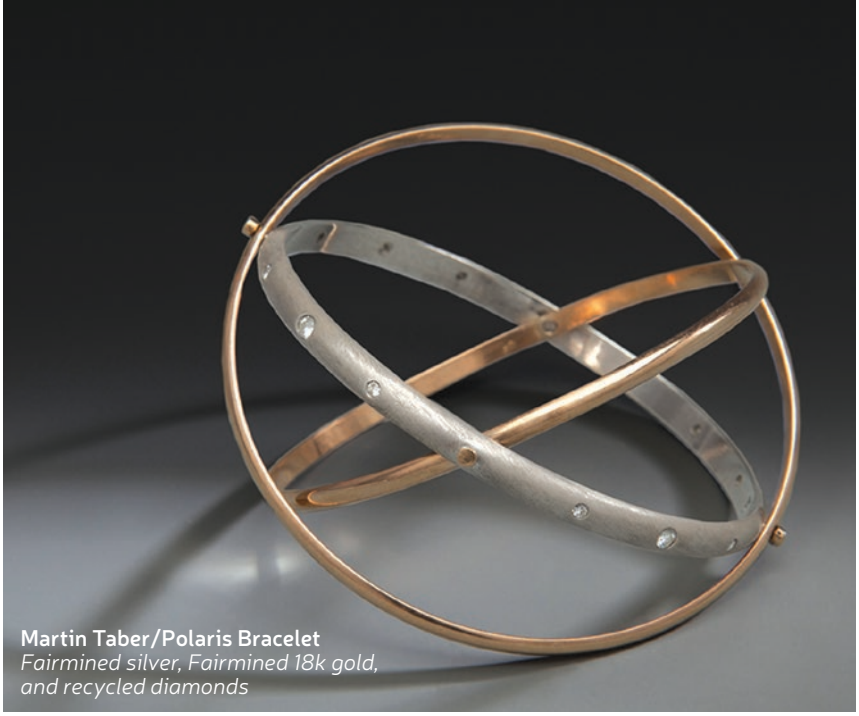
Taber is also a proponent of offering as much choice to his customers as possible. Inspired by a Lake Michigan artist who uses black stones to set diamonds, Taber started incorporating found materials in jewelry about six years ago. He loves working only with pieces he has collected himself and offering customers jewelry "direct from the source." That way, he can discuss the jewelry with the consumers, familiarizing them with its story.

His line of eco haute couture jewelry features found objects, such as driftwood, beach rock, and sea glass, juxtaposed with responsibly sourced 18k gold, silver, diamonds, and pearls. His goal is to invite the consumer to reconsider the term "precious" and to understand that the natural environment is not just a source, but something that can be shaped and used. His mix of high and low elements celebrate the natural world "in its own right, regardless of what humans have decided to call precious." Taber redefines the word to include wildness—he doesn't cut the natural materials, doesn't set bezels around them. The wood is not oiled—it's tumbled in the surf and sun, enhanced by the organic processes alone.

For April Hale, nothing goes to waste—an old wheelbarrow, a pipe from a wooden stove, roofing and fencing wire—all serve as sources.

April Hale/Interstitial Necklace
Found cattle bones, found shotgun shells, wet-felted sheep's wool

Educating Consumers



Martin Taber/Polaris Bracelet
Fairmined silver, Fairmined 18k gold, and recycled diamonds

While working with responsibly sourced precious and nonprecious materials can make a designer feel proud about their work and its lack of effect on the environment, it won't do much good if consumers don't know about or understand it. And getting them to understand, accept, and even request these materials ultimately comes down to how you communicate with them.

Kara Aubin of Kara and Daniel Jewelry in Kalamazoo, Michigan, emphasizes the need to enlighten consumers about aspects of jewelry creation that go beyond the aesthetics. "If you don't understand what goes into making a product, it's hard to know enough to inform the choices you make when consuming the product," she says, noting that the jewelry industry could learn a lot from the agriculture and food industries and how they've managed to create consumer awareness. Just as farmers have increased knowledge about organic foods, jewelers can educate their consumers about sustainable options.

She believes that showing customers what change is possible via the choices they make influences them to be more responsible. As motivation, she likes to

Lauren Brown/Alaskan Gold Nugget Bracelet
Alaskan gold nugget, recycled 18k yellow gold, recycled silver, and conflict-free gray diamonds

connect the customer to the source by sharing images of a mining community in Peru. "We've done events for client education featuring our Fairmined metals collections, where we shared the story of the Aurelsa [mine] personally and via a slideshow. We've hosted Fairtrade gemstone events to share with clients the possibilities in Fairtrade gems. We talk about it, and talk about it, and then talk about it some more."

Similarly, Megan Kitt, founder of Tuli, a company selling jewelry made in Uganda using recycled paper beads, thinks that jewelers can appeal to customers in a way other companies cannot by revealing how their products are made. "Sharing the story behind a product makes monumental strides in consumer education." Kitt feels that transparency can influence the buyers, "I've found that being honest with our customers through our struggles and triumphs creates a level of trust between us that causes them to listen to what we're saying rather than discount it as another marketing effort." A believer in repurposing materials, such as old magazines, that would otherwise be thrown away, Kitt is proud of the fact that local women directly benefit from sales of the jewelry they make. "We practice responsible business that not only provides a beautiful, meaningful product to our customers, but also changes the world for the better," she says.

"For every new consumer we share our story with, we are reaching a few new people with the value we put on sustainable considerations. A slow process, no doubt, but every little bit counts." —Lauren Brown

Taber believes it's vital to inform the customer that buying conventionally doesn't change the system. He looks to form "call-and-response relationships" with his customers. "I let the customers know that these pieces [those made with Fairmined gold] are 20 to 30 percent more expensive and that money is going back into funds that will directly support infrastructure for miners," he explains. He places a 5 percent surcharge on all materials and donates it on a quarterly basis to Ethical Metalsmiths. In addition, he donates 15 percent of his signature line's sales to the Ocean Conservancy and 10 percent of his TS Fine & Green fine jewelry line sales to a mine remediation fund that Ethical Metalsmiths manages. He includes all of this information on his website for his online customers to see.

But perhaps more important than telling your customers about the sustainable materials you use, is sharing with them the reasons why.

For Brown, informing her customers about the reasons for her focus on ethical jewelry making is the most important part of spreading the word about the cause. "While I am the first to acknowledge that sustainability is still an added bonus and sometimes a hindrance due to miseducation in the jewelry space, I still strongly believe that sharing the message is paramount. Don't just tell them what you do—tell them why you do it."

She estimates that about 30 percent of her customers are informed on the subject and choose their jewelry based on its ethical value, as well as the design. "There is a lot of love from consumers searching out considerate products like ours," she says. "And once they come to me, they already know a bit about what they are looking for socially or environmentally." The rest—those who learn about responsibility in her shop—are the customers with whom she shares her story. Brown welcomes the chance to impart her knowledge. "Those who buy from us for design and realize we are responsible are pleas-

antly surprised, and that becomes part of the story they share about us. So for every new consumer we share our story with, we are reaching a few new people with the value we put on sustainable considerations. A slow process, no doubt, but every little bit counts."

In addition to conversations with uninformed customers, Brown thinks that their greatest impact comes from custom design—specifically, the bridal space. Because she works directly with a customer to select materials, describing their in-house processes of recycling consumers' metals and stones into new pieces, the message stays with the consumer. "I get the opportunity to direct them to the most responsible way to make a ring." Brown says that her use of materials such as raw gold and salmon skin leather commonly get the reaction, "What is that?" That curiosity often leads to a discussion about how and why—the perfect foray into a conversation on sustainability.

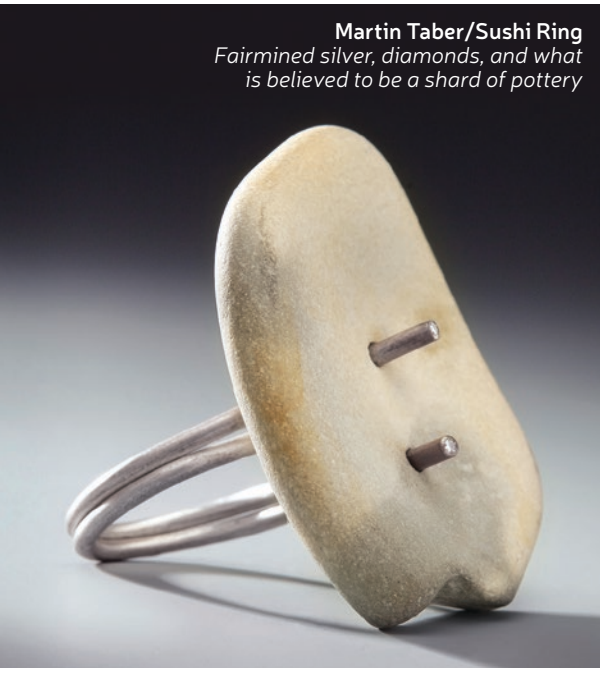
Believing that a great way to communicate with the consumer is through film, Brown is planning to deliver her message by making a documentary about a private, family-owned mine in Niak, Alaska, which her family has been working with for three generations. She sees video as the perfect medium to get this type of message across because consumers often have a hard time digesting the vast amounts of data thrown at them; it doesn't register. In a film, the information is curated; the cinematography and imagery doesn't overwhelm the mind. The most important element in consumer communication—a clean, distilled message—remains. "Keep it simple," she says.

Regardless of the medium you use to promote the cause, it must be done skillfully, without talking down to the customer. It's always a good idea to be careful when you present your efforts to the client. No one wants to listen to proselytizing. Sometimes it's better to wait for the consumer to begin the conversation; that way, you won't be imposing or preaching. Many jewelers are recognizing this need to be tactful and subtle in their approach. They are focusing on offering options rather than unwanted opinions.

For example, Robin Gambhir, cofounder of Toronto's The Fair Trade Jewellery Co. (FJTC), prefers to avoid labels such as "ethical" or "sustainable" altogether. Because he sees these terms as "culture-specific and varying from individual to individual," he chooses to present clients with data instead of moralizing, asking them to make their own judgments. Once they know what's important to them, they can find it among FJTC's array of choices.

As an alternative to advertising their sustainability efforts, FJTC funds documentaries that offer transparency to the consumer. For instance, in *Kingdom of the Sun*, the company's 2016 documentary about ethical gold mining in Bolivia, FJTC co-founder Ryan Taylor clarifies the purpose of the endeavor—"so that customers can understand the impact of buying a product, how it affects the overall structure of a nation." The film demystifies the abstract idea, "It's one thing to tell people what's going on behind a label. It's another thing to show them. And that's why we're here."

"We don't see it as marketing," Gambhir explains, believing that if companies get involved in sustainability only for the marketing, it does not work. Instead, he advises that, if you live and breathe sustainability, consumers eventually pick up on the good that you do. "You can't fake it," he says. "The closer you are to everything, the better it works. Do it because you feel it. Clients will respect your passion." ◆



Martin Taber/Sushi Ring
Fairmined silver, diamonds, and what is believed to be a shard of pottery

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