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April 22nd, 2009

Afternoon coffee with: Paul Donald of Branch

Afternoon coffee with: Paul Donald (founder/owner, [Branch](#))

If I had an empty apartment and someone told me they would fund its décor (okay, I guess this would have to be some sort of reality TV show, but bare with my daydream), but that all accessories had to be from one source, Branch would be my go-to. Not only is the aesthetic of Branch's products the perfect blend of modern warmth, but its owner Paul Donald (formerly the Creative Director here at [Sunset](#)!) has hand-selected each item they carry to ensure it meets the following criteria:

1. made of environmentally responsible materials
2. manufacturing process is ecologically sound
3. the labor employed is treated fairly and provided safe, healthy conditions in which to work

The home and garden products Branch offers are ones you'd want to buy just because they're beautiful, so the fact that they have to meet these strict conditions yields that feel-good, I-can-sleep-better-at-night-knowing-my-money-is-well-spent quality. In the current state of the economy (and that of the planet), this feeling is necessary.

Paul is a good friend, and one of my unofficial eco-experts who I solicit when researching green companies, products, and ideas. And we actually do get to gab about eco-topics over coffee in person from time to time.

PS: Check out [this story](#) on Home by Sunset about how recently Paul proposed to his fiancé with a [100% wool felt ring](#) (sustainable material). So sweet!



Regular or decaf (let's pretend it's 2pm)?

Café latte, please. Regular.

Recycling-geek, vintage-freak, or SUV-driving jock in high school?

I've been an eco-geek since second grade: a naturalist came to talk to our class about the endangered peregrine falcon. Hearing about these nearly-extinct birds was disturbing to me. But she also distributed these super-cool "Wildlife Needs You" stickers, and honestly, I credit those stickers as much as her presentation for capturing my imagination. (I guess that's a good tip for anyone looking for ways to get through to a second-grader.)



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Okay, okay, now we get serious...

What was your inspiration for [Branch](#) and your mission behind it?

My inspiration for starting Branch came from watching people—including my own friends—as they shopped. These people, being generally thoughtful types, certainly hadn't set out to contribute to deforestation in Asia. Yet in consuming some of the products they did, they were essentially doing just that.

So the idea in starting Branch was to get people to think more about the products they buy. I figured that by providing an education about what "ingredients" go into products, and how a product's manufacturing process affects the environment, that maybe we could inspire people to live more sustainably in other areas of their life.

In short, our mission is to advance the sustainability movement, and to encourage sustainable thinking in everyday ways.

What are a few new products you're really enthused about?

We just added two new products by Brooklyn-based Ben Mickus. His [Relief Chair](#) is currently on view as part of the ["Fashioning Felt" exhibit at the Cooper-Hewitt](#).

Both it and the [Floor Perch](#) make use of industrial felt (a material that's 85% recycled fiber) in place of foam and other harmful chemicals that are typical of soft furniture.



On the more-affordable front, I'm loving the ["Outside-In" Bowls](#), and [Bambu's new line of Cork Cutting Boards](#) (which I actually use as a great little bulletin board).





Finally, something that everyone needs as we head into picnic season is stylish yet sustainable disposable plates and cups and the like. We've got a great [selection](#) available, and I love these as they're made from agricultural waste products, and they're compostable.



Why San Francisco?

San Francisco is the perfect place for Branch to be based: it's a hub for green innovation and technology, and new ideas thrive here. There's a great community of smart and interesting people who are into making the world a better place.

And it's beautiful here—whenever I need inspiration, I just go for a walk.

What's a new company (or idea, website, resource, etc) on your green radar you want everyone to know about? (Think: shout from the rooftops)

I'm a huge fan of what Emily Pilloton is doing with [Project H Design](#): directing the design community towards more socially-responsible projects, making it easier for designers to make a difference.

And while it's not "live" just yet, it should be soon: [The Extraordinaries](#) allows people to do volunteer work in their spare time, from wherever they happen to be. It's a perfect blend of crowdsourcing, mobile technology, and volunteerism, and it fits perfectly into our busy lives.

What's one (or two or three) surprising thing(s) everyone can do today to make the world a more sustainable place?

Vote with your dollars. When shopping, ask questions of the shopkeeper about the sustainability of the products you buy. And don't be afraid to demand more of what you're purchasing.

- Eat locally-grown foods. It's fun to eat seasonally, and healthier for you, too.

- At home, unplug your unused appliances when you're not using them. (As you probably know, lots of appliances draw electricity even when they're not on. And most electricity in the U.S. comes from burning coal, a very unclean energy source.)

You're an environmental hero (don't be modest; go with it), but you're also human. What's your eco-confession—something that's been hard to give up in support of a sustainable lifestyle?

While I rarely drive it, I do still own my 1976 BMW 2002. It's just too cute to get rid of.

What's your earth day wish?

My Earth Day wish is that our nation's leaders can do the right thing and buck the powerful interests that hold us back from moving to a more sustainable energy supply. That's something that can benefit us all, in a very big way.

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