

# OUR FUTURE NATURE PODCAST

## SEASON 1

### EPISODE 3: WASTE TO WEALTH, THE WAY OF VEGA

#### SPEAKERS

Sebastien Kopp, Sean Lee Davies

#### **Sean Lee Davies** 00:03

Welcome back to the Sean Lee Davies show changemakers, I'm your host, as always Sean Lee Davies. On changemakers, I talk with some of the best minds and thought leaders in the field of sustainability, conservation and social entrepreneurship. I aim to separate the real deal from the greenwash, and document the transformative technologies that can actually make a difference to our lives and our world. Our guest today is Sebastien Kopp, co-founder and creative director of Veja, the first sustainable sneaker brand in the world. [I] Hope you enjoy [it]. Hi Sebastien! Thanks for joining us.

#### **Sebastien Kopp** 00:38

Hello everybody, good to be with you. We don't [give] a lot of Instagram interviews, so I think it's the first one and very honoured to do it with you guys, because we are from the internet generation, but we're not very at ease doing this, so we [are] learning. So thank you, and very honoured to be with you.

#### **Sean Lee Davies** 01:02

And just so everyone wants to know, where are you right now, Sebastien?

#### **Sebastien Kopp** 01:06

Yes, I'm in Paris, in our new office that we just set up last Monday, so four days ago. And I'm very excited like the whole team is very excited to discover the new office, etc., and Paris, where it's not very sunny today, but it's okay, so the summer is coming.

#### **Sean Lee Davies** 01:29

Well, it looks like a great store. Let's start off by talking [about] going back to the beginning [of] 2004 you decided to create the brand. Can you tell us a little bit more about why you did it [and] what inspired you to do it?

#### **Sebastien Kopp** 01:42

Yes, so it's the story of the brand [that] starts before the brand we were working [on] in New York and in Washington DC. We're in finance where two younger lads in finance were 22-23 years old, starting our career, but we [started and then] we decided to leave everything to start an NGO that was tackling the issue about sustainable development. Meaning it was in 2002, we [were] working in

Washington, and we saw that sustainable development was starting to be an issue, of course, for the planet, for the people, but also for [the] companies. So we went to see big French companies and said, “Guys, we listen to you in your speeches in New York, in Paris, in Asia, talking nice things about the ecology, about social developments. And what we propose you to do is we go on [the] fields, to check what you're doing, and to implement and improve what you're doing on [the] field to see the projects, to work on the projects, you [are] talking about and work on [the] field”.

So we started our path with travelling in South Africa, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Brazil, Bolivia, all around the world in 25 countries to visit and analyse projects about sustainable developments. There were a lot of things [like] there were solar panel projects, there were educational projects, [and] there were social projects in favelas or in poor neighbourhoods, all around the world. And we realised that companies, big companies, were treating sustainable developments as an accessory. It was not integrated into the business. It was for charity. It was doing good things, but on the side, not inside the business. And this was in 2003, and we realised that maybe the business of tomorrow, the company of tomorrow, the project of tomorrow was to internalise social justice, was to internalise the environments and the ecology inside the business, inside the project. So there was our thought in 2003- 2004, and we said, as big companies are communicating that nuts, doing a lot of things, maybe we could create from nothing from scratch. A company that could integrate everything from scratch, from the start and do normal things, treating the workers well, paying the people well, respecting the environment, etc. And we decided to create a new sneaker brand. So we're 25 years old, and all our friends said, “you [are] crazy, you don't know anything about sneakers, you don't know anything about fashion, [and] you don't know anything about pretty much anything”. And that was true. But we're very curious, very keen on travelling [and] very keen on meeting different worlds. So we started the project with no money.

But, we decided to see if it was possible to create a sneaker that would [or if] we could deconstruct a sneaker, the way it's made [of], meaning what we wanted to do [was] a canvas shoe. A canvas shoe is like converse, you know, the canvas is the raw material that is Converse, for example to be used for everybody to know. The first question was what is canvas? And really, as a consumer, as a user, I didn't know “what was canvas?” Canvas is cotton. And what is cotton? It's a plant that uses 2% of the fields, the agricultural field in the world 2% but it's 30% of the pesticides used. It uses a lot of pesticides to grow cotton. So we said what if we try to do organic cotton and what if we try to do fair-trade cotton? Fair-trade cotton means working with producers that are poor, that are marginalised and helping them to develop their own exploitation at their own fields, and paying them well, not paying them with the market price, but with the price that they cannot survive, but live and invest and develop. So we travelled to Brazil, where we found organic cotton producers in very small cooperatives. And we said, “Okay, you have three tons of organic cotton, what if we buy [from] you this cotton at two times or three times the market price and we transform this cotton into a thread, and then into canvas, etc..”. So we did exactly the same thing very innocently. We did exactly the same thing for the rubber of the sole. We went into the Amazonian forest to meet, understand and talk with guys that were living in the forest [and] the communities that were living in the forest. And the way, that we're harvesting rubber on the rubber trees but in the forest not [at

the] plantation. Trees that are growing in the forest [are like] there is one here 50 metres, there is one other 100 metres, there is one other etc.

And so, in 2004, we did eight months of kind of crazy travelling to meet all these people and we [have] learned so much [from them]. I [had] been once into [the] Amazonian forest before, and it was crazy travelling, crazy learning, and crazy meeting. And everybody was saying, "You are crazy, it's not going to work, it's too complicated, nobody does that. And then you have to design your sneakers, and then you have to sell etc., logistics, finance, blah, blah." But we started so small, very, very small. That it was OKAY. It was like an adventure, it was not a company, but not a brand, [it] was an adventure. And it's like you have a big mountain in front of you. You don't watch the top, but you watch all the steps you do to climb this mountain. You're not focused on the top of the mountain, you focus on the step, every step you're doing and the pleasure you have to do every step. So that's pretty much how it began.

**Sean Lee Davies 08:56**

Where did that impetus come from? As you say, you're 23-24, where did this idea that you had to change the way things were done come from? Was that just something that you've grown up with and you wanted to do something more sustainably? Because 2000, now this is at a time where being sustainable wasn't mainstream, so where did this feeling [of] the want to change the business process come from?

**Sebastien Kopp 09:20**

I have to tell you, [and] it was very, I think it was very egoistic. I think this egoism is pretty much saying it means that we create the product that we want to wear, and we still create the product that we want to wear. So it was kind of an egoist act to create a product that was well made in the production sense, in the value chain sense. So it was not a vision for society or it was not a philosophical thought. We said we want to wear stuff like this. We want to wear stuff that are well made and we want to wear stuff that you can be proud of the factory that you are using a well factory where the workers in the factories are proud, and are well paid, and live well and live okay? If not, maybe it doesn't make sense that a guy [living] in a tower in New York, in Hong Kong or Singapore, or Paris makes a lot of money, and the others NO..., and the others are not living well. So that's something inside Veja that we want everybody to get well paid on all the production chains, from the organic cotton producers to the stores. And that's, that was not a vision, that was what we wanted for us. Maybe it sounds strange, but it's true.

**Sean Lee Davies 11:05**

I mean, in a way, you're pioneering this kind of form of social enterprise. If you like, what, how maybe you can describe [it]. Do you reconcile if paying more for the mark of the raw materials than the market would and making that profitable? Because it's not easy, is it you're paying, say double of what you might normally pay, so that the people on about half our lives, but it works from a financial point of view?

**Sebastien Kopp** 11:33

It's quite easy in our minds, it was, first we didn't know anything about prediction costs, prices, etc, [and] we didn't know anything, so we learned [about it]. And then the idea came, maybe after six months of learning. Maybe what we could do is we eradicate marketing, we eradicate advertising, we eradicate sponsoring, we eradicate partnerships with celebrities, basketball players, soccer players, baseball players, whatever you want, we don't do any marketing, nothing. And all this resource that is not used is put into production, which today and other time also we produce a sneaker that cost three times to five times more than it would if we make them usual. Meaning with poor raw materials in factories that don't respect workers' lives very well, where people are not very well paid etc., and so our sneakers cost three to five times more, even sometimes seven times more. But they land on the markets at the same price as the big brands, same category of products, because we don't do marketing. That's the only trick we use. If we can call that a trick [and] it's not a big trick, but we didn't do any marketing, so all this marketing is put into production. That's it.

**Sean Lee Davies** 13:17

Amazing, so fair-trade is very much part of the DNA of your brand, and because you don't spend any money on marketing, you feel while it obviously has done [it]. But you feel that the word of mouth and now the awareness of your sustainable production is going to propel you to a bigger market.

**Sebastien Kopp** 13:37

Yeah, and we thought also if we do real projects, if we do crazy projects that have not been done, maybe people are going to speak about it. Maybe people are going to be interested about it but really interested, not like you are interested in a Jordan campaign, marketing campaign. Maybe it seems cool to you, [and] it seems okay you [have] watched it, and then you forget [about it]. Our projects are not like this. We are putting the lights on the Amazonia, for example. We are putting the lights on organic cotton, [and] we are putting the lights on what is a shoe factory. We're putting the lights on logistics, a warehouse, a social inclusion warehouse, where people with broken lives are working, and they are doing the logistics of Veja. And a lot of people in 2005, they said it didn't interest anybody. Nobody gives [a thought] about this, and that was true. But we gave it, [and] we thought it was important. And so maybe we follow our heart, maybe we follow what we thought was important.

And today, more and more people are interested about it, more and more people see the injustice of the world we are creating, more and more people see there are problems in the world, which could be environmental problems, which could be social problems, etc. So we don't, we're not here to change the world, we're not here to say, Veja is changing everything except we change at our level. And for us, it's okay, [and] it's sufficient. We don't have to convince everybody. We don't have to convince everybody that [it] is a good way; that's our way. Some people like it, some people don't like it, it's okay. But what we do, we don't convince, we act, [and] we do. And we take pleasure [in] doing it. That's the most important, I think, taking pleasure in what you do, following what you feel inside, and respecting what you believe is the DNA of Veja.

**Sean Lee Davies** 16:00

That's very inspiring. I mean, what really impresses me is how you've built this brand, without any external investment to begin with, at least, and without any marketing, so it's all word of mouth. Do you have any advice for independent brands starting out now like, how do you go about doing that, without getting a lot of investment at the beginning, you know, building it organically?

**Sebastien Kopp** 16:22

I was talking about it a few weeks ago, [and] it's the relationship we have with time. Today, we live in a world where everybody is crazy for time, meaning you want to set up a brand that is well known all around the world in one year. And this is not good. For me, this is not good. Like good projects, it takes time. It takes time because if you are in a hurry, of course, you're going to meet problems that are not being solved. You're taking crap, [and] you have to [be] there, [it] is a learning process every day. So you have to take your time, you don't have to build a brand, or build whatever kind of company to get one year or two years and switch to another one. Because lot of my friends, they said, "Oh, you're doing Veja, you've been doing Veja for 15 years you're not bored?" I say no, because we put everything that we have in us in the brands, we put all the love, all the thoughts, all the ideas we have, we try to translate it into the brand, into projects inside the brand. So bored, I've never been bored. I've never been so excited that every day because we would say yeah, we weren't as we are free. Well we don't have any investors etc. We can take a path, we can take ways that are a bit crazy, or you know that, like let's say we opened our first store in Paris in October, it was a huge success, it's still a huge success, there is a line every day, etc. But like if you have investors that say, "Okay, so open everywhere. Open". And we don't want to, [and] we want to have one, two, and three [and] make it very well, create different projects, but take our time. And that's the relationship with time that is important. That's all the nice projects like Lane Crawford. How long [did it] took [take] Lane Crawford to be created? Years! Decades! The nice projects, they take decades to be created, [and] it's not one year- two years. Where in my generation, which is the Google generation, we had bad examples on [of] this, like a Google that is [a] set up and in two years, it's worldwide and huge, etc. But it's not normal.

**Sean Lee Davies** 18:54

Absolutely, its tech timeline seems to be very different to building sustainable brands, it's a different kind of mindset. I totally agree with you. As a founder, what advice would you give to other companies in terms of, you know... the fashion industry has to look into being more sustainable? Can your business model and practices be applied to other brands into other fashion businesses and other footwear businesses, or are you the only ones who can implement this?

**Sebastien Kopp** 19:27

No, you know, I'm always not very at ease to give pieces of advice to other people. Because who am I to give advice? There are a lot of people in the fashion industry that know much better than I do. So what we try to do is our projects, you know, and then I was telling you that convincing other people doesn't interest me, because I think only acts and reality [can] convince people, words, [or] giving pieces of advice...[and] I'm not at ease [with that]. Because it's really, it was really easy in a way to

build something like Veja, because we started from scratch. Maybe it's much more difficult to change a business that is rolling, but that is not respecting the environment, or respecting the people but the business is rolling. So it's really difficult to change a business that is rolling, because they don't want to change. They say, "Why changing? We are doing well. Thank you, Sebastien. We are doing okay. Don't give me advice". And they are right. So I think it's step by step and I think everybody can dive into this within their own way, and what I dream of is not giving advice and say, "Yes, the Veja business model is the best man". No, it's not the best. It's our model. But please invent another one, invent better, implement this and surprise us. That's what I dream of. It's, I don't dream of a big Veja, or I don't dream of a thousand companies like Veja, but I dream of a thousand companies with different things, inventing, etc. That's what I like, diversity. Diversity is better for everybody. And everybody gives us stuff. So giving advice, I'm not at ease. You have everything on the website of Veja. Everything is put [on it], [and] everything would [let you know like what] that we do with the cost, with the volume, with suppliers [and] with everything. So if somebody can take it, and learn from it and do something else, it's even better, I think.

**Sean Lee Davies** 21:45

Fantastic, just quickly about you just opened a store recently in Bordeaux, is that correct? It sounds very exciting, would you [like to] talk a little about that?

**Sebastien Kopp** 21:54

Yes. So it was like, almost two years of work. We opened in Bordeaux, which is a city in front of the sea, [and] it could be like, I would say, San Francisco or Los Angeles in the US because it's on the Pacific, on the Atlantic Ocean. And it's a real nice city to live [in]. I have a friend that opens a crazy four acres place, and it's an old military barrack. So it's a really nice place with a thousand people working in NGO's, working in very innovative companies' altogether. There [are] huge organic restaurants. There is a skate park, a huge one like the biggest skate park in Europe. So the place is a bit crazy. It looks a bit like Berlin, and we opened up a huge store there. They're very nice; because the building is very nice we didn't do a lot. So the building was so nice we didn't do a lot. We decided to turn it into our first laboratory test project to repair, clean, collect and recycle old shoes. So there, we are not selling it's not a Veja store, [a] typical Veja store. It's selling our prototypes, selling things that we didn't launch, selling old collections that are back, there's not a lot left with selling, it's more a prototype store, and then a place to recycle shoes, start to the start of the recycling for Veja.

I wanted a physical place to start this movement, because the end of life of products, we were very bad. We did nothing during those 15 years. We focused on all the steps before one customer buys a Veja, but after, we didn't work on it. So for me, it was jumping into this repairing and recycling project because sneakers are maybe one of the most difficult products to recycle with [other than] phones, for example, because it has so much material, cross materials, stitched materials, glued materials [on them], that it's really complicated to recycle. So we put a team on this to analyse what we could do to go see all the actors, all the players have recycling and create [a] new recycling chain for Veja. So, for Veja and my dream is for other brands also to be able to recycle [like] Veja. But also

all the other brands so that when the store we have in Bordeaux is really somewhere to stop this as a test on a local scale. Because I always love to do projects that start small and that are growing organically, naturally, I would say. And so it's really the beginning because we opened up two weeks ago.

I don't have any feedback about people. I see that people are leaving their old shoes, wearing out shoes into the boxes [that] we [have] created there. But yes, this project is, in one year, I think we could talk more because we haven't said what we're going to do with the recycled shoes yet. We wait for the result to be here to divulge what we're going to do [about it].

**Sean Lee Davies** 25:43

So, you don't know what you are going to do with recycled shoes, you're just collecting them first and then...

**Sebastien Kopp** 25:47

We're collecting, we're recycling, and we're going to do something and maybe you can imagine what we can do, but I won't tell [you]. I won't say [anything about this].

**Sean Lee Davies** 25:55

I'm looking forward to that result. So what else is on the horizon for Veja? Is it just sneakers or do you have other categories that you might be looking into?

**Sebastien Kopp** 26:05

Oh, no, it's only sneakers, we have so many projects going on. We launched the first running Veja, a running shoe, a performance shoe in September 2019, so it's going to be one year. [We got the] very good feedback from the stores [and] very good feedback from the clients, so, the second one arrived in Paris. They are the first prototypes of the second running shoe [that] arrived in Paris yesterday. And we're very glad because we enhanced what we did. The first shoe was good. I think the second shoe is great, so it's going to be launched in January 2021. [I'm] very glad that it's here. And we are working on a lot of shoes, a lot of collaborations etc. But you know we don't like to speak about what's not on the markets. We never talk about something that has not landed because it's our way to avoid any greenwashing to avoid any promises. We prefer reality. So we don't speak about the projects. I think we're going to be slow a bit because last year was really crazy. When we opened a store in Paris, we opened a store in a really nice store in New York, and we opened in Bordeaux, we launched the running shoe, etc. So the whole team is exhausted. The whole Veja team is exhausted. So I had a speech [word/talk] with them this morning because we just entered our new office in Paris, and I said, "Please go on holiday, you have to rest. Everybody has to rest this summer because everybody is exhausted. So please, if you didn't plan to go on holidays, plan it, and if you plan to go on holidays, plan longer because everybody has to rest, to be back in [at the] end of August-September, in a good shape, relaxed, etc". Like what we have been through this year has been difficult on [from] a personal and a professional point of view. So everybody has rested. I don't know how you feel it in Hong Kong, but if everybody's exhausted, but I feel a lot of wrath; I feel nothing

[for] the team members [or for] the society, I feel love. People are angry. People are tired. People are tired of the unknown, etc. I don't know, how [do] you feel [about this] in Hong Kong?

**Sean Lee Davies** 28:43

I don't think Hong Kong actually manages the situation pretty well. I think people will be working. But I think the unknown [of] not being able to travel is a big thing for people in Hong Kong, we are used to travelling a lot. But I think the uncertainty like you mentioned is the biggest problem like no one knows, you know, from a professional point of view, what you can plan [for the] next month. And then, as you said, we have another pop up of a cluster of cases [where] everything has to be cancelled again. It's like where do we go from here, how can we be creative, how can we be innovative if no one can go out and do anything? So you know it's about dealing with the unknown and being mindful that as long as we're healthy, that's really to be grateful for. So it sounds like many interesting projects on the horizon for you Sebastien, [I am] looking forward to the new shoes, and can't wait to hear more. It's very inspiring hearing how you basically came. You started doing this when it wasn't really in vogue at all. And you know you've now seen it all the way through becoming one of the most hip sneaker brands in the world without any marketing. That's really quite something, so congratulations on that.

**Sebastien Kopp** 29:57

And there's still a lot to do, a lot to achieve for us, it's the beginning really, it's really the beginning of a lot of people are talking about sustainability today, but really nothing has been done. We are at 1% of what could be achieved in the fashion industry, I'm saying.

**Sean Lee Davies** 30:16

Absolutely, I think if other brands can learn how you've internalised the principles, you know, people, planet, and profit. I think it's going to be great and help transform the whole industry, so on behalf of Lane Crawford, thank you again for joining us. Good luck with all the great endeavours, and [I] look forward to hearing more about your success in the future. Stay safe.

**Sebastien Kopp** 30:39

Thank you very much, bye-bye!

**Sean Lee Davies** 30:42

Thanks, Sebastien. Bye Bye! If you like our show and want to support our work, we have a patreon link on my website [www.seanleedavies.com](http://www.seanleedavies.com). We'll be back next week. See you then.