

Organic and Naturally Pigmented Cotton Cultivation in Peru: Reemergence of a major fiber producer

Vreeland, J.M.¹

Abstract

Organic cotton farming in Peru is as old as the plant itself, identified as a primitive domesticate in archaeological sites dating to the third millennium BC (Bird 1985; Stephens 1975; Vreeland 1993, 1999). Cotton traditionally has constituted the largest crop grown in Peru, covering as much as 250,000 hectares in recent years. Between 2.5% and 5% of all Peruvian cotton is still cultivated organically, on an estimated 3,500 hectares, some 85% of which is concentrated in the high jungle region of the northeast.

Since domestication, cotton in Peru has included naturally colored land races that still survive throughout the country, largely as a dooryard crop. All colored cotton is organic, but it accounts for less than the estimated 0.25% of Peruvian organic cotton grown annually. However, only an estimated 562 hectares of all organic cotton is actually certified as such. A much larger amount, some years surpassing 3,000 ha, is cultivated with traditional techniques by indigenous or peasant farmers who sell their raw material or seed cotton to commercial gins, disinterested in organic cotton markets.

Peru is renowned for the high quality of the conventional cotton textile sector, serving large segments of the demand for the fine knits and wovens in Europe, Asia, and the USA (Vreeland 1996, 1997, 2007). With a formidable spinning and weaving infrastructure and extensive cut-and-sew garments production capacity, it's clear that Peru combines significant genetic and human resources to sustain an emerging organic cotton fiber industry, in which it is now a major player.

Several principal reasons can be cited here for Peru's preeminent status. First, the Andean region of South America, and principally Peru, has generally been regarded as the center of the origin for the cotton species Gossypium barbadense, considered the finest, longer staple cotton produced commercially today (Wendel 1995). Second, cotton can be harvested in many different regions of the country throughout the year. Third, the main harvest occurs between April and September, ahead of those produced in the Northern Hemisphere. Fourth, relatively high-yielding, long staple commercial and native varieties are available for adaptation to organic farming systems. Finally, surviving indigenous and traditional peasant farming technologies have remained largely organic since the domestication of the species 4,500 years ago (Vreeland 1992, 1993).

¹ Department of Anthropology University of Texas, Austin, USA