



by *Mindy Weisberger*

In the fall of 2011, a New Zealand oil spill sparked a chain reaction of frenzied knitting activity. A local yarn store posted an urgent call for penguin sweaters to warm the affected birds and prevent them from nibbling the oil off their feathers. In less than a week, knitters from around the world had crafted and delivered far more sweaters than there were penguins. While there's nothing new about activist knitting, over the last decade the Internet has become an important factor in connecting urgent causes and eager activists, allowing today's fiber warriors to quickly find each other and respond more creatively and enthusiastically than ever. By applying their flying fingers to unlikely patterns, and constructing sometimes-unusual objects, they address challenges that are social and environmental.

When the container ship, *MV Rena*, ran aground on New Zealand's Astrolabe Reef on October 5, 2011, environmentalists called it one of the worst conservation disasters in New Zealand's history. Nearly 2,000 barrels of oil poured into the wildlife-rich ecosystem; the slick spread for several kilometers, killing dozens of sea birds and leaving many coated with toxic oil. But the story of the spill had an unexpected twist, as it was upstaged in the news by the overwhelming response of concerned knitters reacting to the ecological emergency.

The official rescue center had to keep the oil-saturated penguins from preening their feathers while they waited to be cleaned. Skeinz yarn store in Napier, New Zealand was approached to organize knitters to create protective, penguin-sized sweaters. Their free patterns were downloaded, eagerly knit and whimsically customized by the hundreds, and the story of penguins in need spread rapidly across the Internet. Coverage on traditional news sites such as *Huffington Post*, *ABC News*, *CBC*, *NPR*, and *UPI* was complemented by popular culture destinations like *Jezebel*, *Gawker*, and *Laughing Squid*. Spurred by irresistible photos of sweater-clad penguins, the global response was overwhelming; Skeinz was soon posting on its blog that the environmental workers now had far more sweaters than they had penguins.



*Little penguin (Eudyptula minor) wearing a hand-knit sweater. Photo courtesy Lyn Blom of Phillip Island Nature Parks.*

This isn't the first time that knitters have come to the aid of penguins in crisis. In January 2002, an oil spill near Philip Island in Southern Australia prompted an outpouring of thousands of sweaters from knitters around the world for affected Little penguins. The campaign received so much attention that it ended up inspiring a song, "Sweaters for Penguins", which was featured on

Canada's CBC radio. At final count, the Tasmanian Conservation Trust received over 10,000 sweaters, which they stored in Oil Response Kits for future use.

Humanitarian causes also stir knitters to action. Afghans for Afghans — formed shortly after the United States invaded Afghanistan — began supplying relief agencies with knit and crocheted blankets and clothing for Afghan civilians in 2001. Knitters and crocheters shared the organization's message and guidelines on blogs and through their local yarn stores, schools, and religious organizations, working individually or coming together to craft thousands of items. More than ten years later, the organization is still managing knitting campaigns, providing much-needed garments to children and adults affected by the war.



*Knit Water Aid and thousands of knitters from around the globe contributed squares for Knit a River, a knitted petition designed to raise awareness about the 1.1 billion people without access to clean drinking water. Photo courtesy I Knit London.*

Knitters have also mobilized in great numbers to make bold, visual declarations about important global issues. To raise awareness about the 1 billion people worldwide without access to clean drinking water, the London yarn store and knitting organization I Knit partnered with WaterAid. The campaign, dubbed Knit A River, was the world's first knitted petition, an undulating river of blue knit squares pieced together with the help of thousands of knitters worldwide.

Other knit activists use sly humor and the power of social media to make a point. The Snatchel Project began as a Twitter feed to express concerns that proposed U.S. legislation would limit American women's access to affordable birth control and reproductive healthcare. It evolved into a campaign that mobilized knitters on [Facebook](#), [Ravelry](#), and [Twitter](#) to send their Congressional representatives a knitted uterus along with a message that read "Hands off my uterus! Here—have a knitted one of your own!" At present count, about 275 uteri have been sent or hand delivered to government officials in 41 states.





*The Snatchel Projects sent knit uteri to Congress to express concerns about proposed legislation that would limit women's access to reproductive healthcare. Photo courtesy Essie Woods Bruell.*

The social issues these projects touch on may take years or even decades to find resolution, but at least one has found a happy ending. Nearly 100 of the penguins of New Zealand were successfully cleaned and returned to the sea in November of 2011. Left with a number of sweaters that hadn't been used, Skeinz consulted with local conservationists and established the [Penguin Rescue Fund](#), selling stuffed toy penguins dressed in the donated hand-knits. All funds from the sales are distributed to local organizations working to help wildlife affected by oil spills.

Thanks to the Internet—and social media in particular—it has never been easier for knitters and

crocheters to form communities, share information, and take action. For many, the craft is much more than a practical hobby or a creative act—it's a means of forging connections within families, between friends, and across continents. And sometimes, it's a way to make a statement, or, in some cases, to make a difference.



*Excess sweaters from the Skeinz penguin project have been put to good use dressing plush penguins like Flip and Peggy, the Penguin Rescue Fund mascots. Sales of the dolls support organizations working to help wildlife affected by oil spills. Photo courtesy Penguin Rescue Fund*

*Mindy Weisberger recently discovered that she is a full-fledged science geek, and is making up for lost time as a writer/producer with *Science Bulletins* at the American Museum of Natural History. As a filmmaker and writer, she has created museum media installations, music videos, fashion news segments, documentaries, and experimental films, and her work has been shown at The Kitchen and PS 122, on E! Entertainment Television and MTV, and in museums around the world. She can*

*simultaneously knit and compress 1080i to H.264 MOV at 5000 kbps.*