



Luxury Living, Positive Impact: A Q&A with Native Trails Founder, Naomi Neilson Howard



California-based [Native Trails](#) is a company that specializes in artisan crafted, sustainable products for the kitchen and bath. They're widely renowned for their line of handcrafted copper sinks, but they've also branched out to develop new materials for their sinks, as well as a line of bath furniture and mirrors made from reclaimed wood.

We spoke with Native Trails founder and CEO, Naomi Neilson Howard about her company and the many ways it strives to offer "Luxury living with a positive impact."

Can you give us a little background on you started your company?

Absolutely. I founded Native Trails almost 20 years ago in 1996, and what inspired me to start this business was family trips to Mexico and meeting these incredible artisans in these obscure village markets – kind of out in the middle of nowhere. These artisans didn't usually receive a lot of respect, they didn't have a way to sell their products – outside of their villages to whoever would happen to come to them – and they didn't really have a sense of what people wanted outside of their area. So they were often selling kind of the wrong thing. But beautiful materials, beautiful workmanship, and I saw their work and thought, wow, what incredible potential.

So I decided to start working with them, bringing them designs for products that would sell in our market and working with them to get their quality to the level that we needed it and providing a marketplace for them to sell their products. It's been really amazing – the artisans have always been my inspiration and that's the focus of our work. We're creating beautiful designs and staying ahead of the

game and always coming out with new things, and that's what makes us successful. And I think that's really staying true to who we are.



What are the benefits of hand-crafting your products?

Well first, you really couldn't get a look like our products have if it wasn't handmade. If we tried to make our sinks with machines – and in fact, people have tried to do that – it's just a very different look. You can't get the look of our hammered finish with a machine, so that's part of it. And I think the inherent variations that make each product unique are really important – really, every piece is different. The hammering of the copper also strengthens it, so that's also a big benefit.

Our products are truly hand-crafted. Our [Maestro](#) collection of sinks, for example, they take about 30,000 strikes of the hammer to make one single sink. So it's a pretty labor-intensive process! And it's also something that not just anyone can do. The artisans we work with have been doing this for generations in most cases and you can say that the coppersmithing runs in their blood, because their families have these traditions of coppersmithing that go way back. They're very skilled and it takes years and years to become good at what they do.

Can you describe what happens to finish of your sinks over time?

With a Native Trails copper sink, it requires very little maintenance, which is one thing that's really wonderful and it surprises people – people often think that they're going to have to work harder to maintain a copper sink. But when you have a really good quality sink that has a patina applied to it to start, that patina actually protects it.

The patina is the darkening of copper and that's the state that you actually buy our sinks and bathtubs and range hoods in when you purchase them. Over time, it will age somewhat and it will react with materials in a really wonderful way – people are almost always pleasantly surprised with how good it looks and how it continues to really look better over time. It'll darken a little bit, or it could lighten a little bit, just really depending on what you do to it. You don't want to use any harsh abrasives, but at the same time, if you do, it will patina back over.

Also, I don't know whether you know this about copper, but copper itself actually kills bacteria. It's pretty incredible. There are some studies out there that verify that and it's pretty amazing. So copper itself, in a sense, you could say it keeps itself clean. Of course, you have to clean it and do the normal things that you do, but it does give you that extra peace of mind, knowing that you have a material that actually kills bacteria on contact.



How important are the environmental benefits of copper?

Sustainability is definitely a cornerstone of our philosophy at Native Trails. We believe strongly that everything that we make should have, at the minimum, a neutral effect on the environment and ideally, a positive effect on the environment. So we work with a lot of materials that are reclaimed, repurposed, not only our copper sinks but our [bath furniture](#) which we make out of reclaimed wood. We take wine barrel staves and old fencing and turn it into bath furniture. But back to the copper, all of our copper is recycled, so we don't use any "new" copper. All of the copper that we use in our sinks is recycled from electrical wiring that's being replaced, copper pipes – all sorts of sources for the copper. It's melted down and purified, and hammered out and turned into our sinks.



How important is it to look at the underside of the sink and what should one look for?

That's an interesting question. Well, you can look for the Native Trails logo! (laughs) That's a pretty sure indication that it's going to be good quality, but other than that, you absolutely can look for the Uniform Plumbing Code (UPC) certification sticker. That's actually very important. UPC certification is going to ensure that the copper is pure and that it has not been contaminated with impurities. And that's very important because you don't want your sink to turn green on you, and if there are a lot of impurities it is not going to maintain its beautiful patina. If there are impurities there also could be lead and toxic materials in there that could actually be a health hazard. So the UPC certification is one thing that can make you feel comfortable that the material has been tested and that it meets certain standards. That's also important because a lot of areas require that to ensure that the sink is up to code – some municipalities are much stricter than others. But all of our sinks are UPC-certified.

So it's a very important part of what we do. And in addition to the environmental sense, we feel like we have a responsibility to be sustainable in the social sense. So we have a whole other part of our philosophy that revolves around the social sustainability and how we work with the communities and what we do to be a positive influence on our artisans' lives. Being a positive influence on the planet is just incredibly important.

What prompted your development of NativeStone and what are some of the benefits of this material?

We're always on the lookout for great materials that are environmentally sustainable and lend themselves to artisanal creativity and beauty – both in form and function. That's not an easy bill to fill, so it had been years since we'd launched a new sink material.

Then finally, we discovered this technique of combining natural jute fiber with cement to make concrete even more sustainable – about 40% lighter than standard concrete, and more resilient – and we knew we were on to something transformational.

Concrete itself has so many benefits - it can be formed into nearly any shape, and it has the ability to combine its inherently rustic, earthy appeal with a smooth, contemporary aesthetic. The "rustic modern" look is very popular right now, and the material itself is timeless.



The last dilemma we faced was how to seal these pieces in a way that would render them impermeable to staining – the biggest complaint about typical concrete. After many months, years actually, of trials, we came up with the perfect sealer – a "nanosealer" that penetrates on a molecular level to create a barrier against staining that holds up over time. There is no need to reseal it and it always looks great. It's very exciting. We've created a series of sinks with all the great appeal of concrete yet without the usual drawbacks. And they have been a tremendous hit – it's been quite thrilling!

Can you talk about your bath furniture and mirrors?

Our [Americana Collection](#) is a bath furniture and mirror series created by local California craftspeople. The wood itself, reclaimed locally from structures of the past such as old barns and fencing, has a lot of history. We work with some really incredible artisans who make furniture "the way they used to make it" – these are heirloom pieces that will last generations.



We are based in the heart of California's wine country, so our Vintner's Collection was inspired by our local winemaking industry. We saw beautiful oak materials like barrels and wine staves being discarded at the end of their useful life in winemaking, and realized that there was a twofold opportunity. We could reduce the load on the local landfills while creating bath furniture with a great story to tell and a look that simply cannot be created from new wood.

It's not easy to recondition the wood and build furniture from this material; each piece of wood is unique as a result of prolonged contact with wine and the effects of weather over time, but the result is an incredibly durable material and a very unique design aesthetic that is really beautiful.





What's next for Native Trails? Do you have any new product lines in development?

We are working on a series of really beautiful, artisan made dining tables and conference tables. The tops are made from either hammered copper or NativeStone concrete, and the base is a beautiful acacia wood – sustainably grown of course!

http://community.homeclick.com/article/2613/luxury-living-positive-impact-a-ganda-with-native-trails-founder-naomi-neilson-howard?trk_msg=AETCD300ACEKV2TJ1DIUSP14PK&trk_contact=4SNRP4MMRGVFR4CVK1BL3B0N40&utm_source=Listrak&utm_medium=Email&utm_term=Luxury+Living,+Positive+Impact:++A+Q&A+with+Native+Trails+Founder,+Naomi+Neilson+Howard&utm_campaign=Homeclick+Community+Update