

# When a Watch Box Aims to Aid the Environment

Companies are turning to more natural ingredients, such as seaweed, to produce biodegradable packing for their luxury timepieces.

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This watch box is made of a textured black material called Notpla Rigid, a byproduct of processed seaweed, which could dissolve into liquid if submerged in water for a few hours. Photo illustration by Brent Austin

PARIS — A well-made mechanical watch can be passed down to younger generations as a sustainable product. But must its packaging also endure the test of time?

On a planet threatened by environmental calamity, watch boxes made of non-biodegradable materials such as plastic can end up in landfills or as

litter in oceans. But now, a Swiss watch brand is proposing packaging that can disappear — digested by nature.

“Our new box is the first home-compostable packaging for the luxury watchmaking industry,” Nicolas Freudiger, the co-founder and co-chief executive of [ID Genève](#), said by phone from Geneva. “It is made entirely from seaweed and completely dissolves in water.”

The box in question is made from a textured black material called Notpla Rigid, a byproduct of processed seaweed. Both the material and the box were developed by [Notpla](#) (short for not plastic), an award-winning London-based start-up that specializes in sustainable containers using seaweed extract to replace single-use plastic.

“If you submerge the box in water for a few hours, it will dissolve into a liquid that can then be used to fertilize house plants,” Mr. Freudiger said.

Notpla Rigid is used for packaging of the Circular S, a watch introduced in November by ID Genève. The watch is made from recycled stainless steel supplied by [Panatere](#), a Swiss maker of watch components that uses steel derived from the waste of watch and medical companies collected in the Jura region and melted in a solar furnace. Each Circular S comes with two straps: One is a textile made from wine residue and the other is made from what the company calls green waste, gathered in London’s parks.

The decision to develop biodegradable packaging is part of the commitment of ID Genève, a Swiss brand founded in 2020, to what’s known as the circular economy, in which a production chain is entirely based on sustainable development. The brand also has used boxes made from fungi-derived mycelium produced by the London-based Magical Mushroom Company.

“Our approach is innovation-focused, in our design and in sourcing new materials,” Mr. Freudiger said.

The Circular S is being sold in a first edition of 300, called the Lab Edition. Priced from 4,300 to 4,600 Swiss francs, or \$4,636 to \$4,959, (depending on the buckle style and decorative details on the case), it is available in six dial colors, with deliveries expected in February. "Presales are going well, we have strong distributor orders," Mr. Freudiger said.

ID Genève and Notpla, which employs more than 60 people, displayed the prototype for the Notpla Rigid watch box in November at [Re-Luxury](#), a trade show in Geneva dedicated to secondhand commerce in the luxury goods industry that brought together 40 Swiss and international exhibitors.

A few months earlier, Mr. Freudiger said, he had learned about the potential of seaweed when he discovered Notpla's "[Ooho bubbles](#)," at [Change Now](#), a three-day summit of eco-entrepreneurs in Paris. Oohos are small edible capsules (resembling a laundry detergent pod) made from seaweed and other plants, whose soft outer envelope is designed to hold a liquid. Potential uses are described by the company as water capsules handed out to marathoners, single-serving condiment packets or even shots of drinks like strawberry daiquiris.

"Our collaboration became real very quickly since Notpla was able to come up with this new product in a matter of months," Mr. Freudiger said.

Seaweed is considered one of the planet's most plentiful resources and an ideal biodegradable material. "It requires no input, no fresh water and no fertilizer to grow," said Notpla's co-founder, Pierre-Yves Paslier. Sam Scales

Pierre-Yves Paslier, a French-born innovation design engineer who co-founded Notpla in 2014, said by phone from London, "We look to nature to see what it uses as packaging material."

"We chose seaweed for its immense potential and because it returns easily to nature as an ingredient that nature recognizes," said Mr. Paslier.

Seaweed, the common name for a variety of species of marine plants and algae that grow in bodies of water, is considered one of the planet's most plentiful resources. "Unlike agricultural products, seaweed grows extremely fast, at a rate of one meter [more than a yard] per day," Mr. Paslier said. "It requires no input, no fresh water and no fertilizer to grow."

In December, Notpla won the top prize in the "Build a Waste-free World" category at the [Earthshot Prize](#), a charity founded in 2020 by Prince William that rewards entrepreneurs for their contributions to finding climate solutions. As one of five winners chosen among 1,000 nominees and 15 finalists, Notpla won a million British pounds, or about \$1.2 million.

"Notpla shows that the future is not plastic, it is seaweed," the Earthshot Prize said on its website.

The industry is taking note.

ID Genève's Circular S watch was made from recycled stainless steel and comes with two strap options: a textile made from wine residue and what the company calls green waste, gathered in London's parks.

ID Genève is one of several watch brands adopting forms of sustainable packaging. In 2021, Breitling introduced its [foldable box](#), made from recycled polyethylene terephthalate, known as PET, from plastic bottles. Others, like Alpina, Oris and IWC, also offer boxes made partly of recycled materials.

A 2022 [Deloitte](#) Swiss Watch Industry Study found that 27 percent of consumers said they viewed minimal or recycled packaging as the "most important aspect of sustainability" for a watch or the watch industry. Its online survey of senior industry executives, experts and consumers also found that 87 percent of the industry executives considered "recycled packaging" as their top concern, just ahead of certified ethical gold (82 percent) and recycled materials (81 percent).

The challenge for luxury companies is to turn what can be perceived as

poor materials into upscale packaging for high-end products. They tend to be tight-lipped about what's in the pipeline.

"We have produced new packaging for a watch brand that asked for an eco-designed box that was identical to its existing model," said Jeremia Adate, a designer and administrator at Adate Design, an industrial design studio in Lausanne, Switzerland. (Mr. Adate said he was not allowed to disclose the name of the watch brand.)

"With our proprietary technology, we have managed to take recycled [cardboard](#) and reproduce the shape of the brand's conventional watch box, with the curves and convex surfaces, without any plastic or metal parts," Mr. Adate said. The box, not yet introduced into the market, has passed all of the brand's internal tests, including on humidity and emissions, he said.

Mr. Paslier said that a number of watch brands have inquired about Notpla Rigid, but he declined to disclose their names.

"Things are changing fast in the transition to a more sustainable world," Mr. Freudiger said. "We are reinventing luxury for tomorrow and we want Swiss watchmaking to be at the forefront."

Coverage of watches and the watchmaking business, from The New York Times.

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