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FROM SOAP TO THE HIGH SEAS:
ALL-ONE WITH DR. BRONNER’S

This month we spoke with Michael Bronner, President of Dr. Bronner’s. His family has been making soap since 1858. His grandfather, Emanuel Bronner, founded Dr. Bronner’s in California in 1948, selling ecological soaps and sharing the message “We are All-One or None!”

Parvati Magazine: How has being a Bronner shaped your views and inspired the company’s strong social and environmental activism and business practices?

Michael Bronner: I was raised a normal American kid, not concerned about the legacy of the soap business. Dad and Mother instilled concrete values in me, rather than my grandfather, who seemed very much the man on the mountain to me as a kid. Only as I matured was I able to understand how deep and forward thinking my grandfather was and how ambitious his vision was.

The humanistic values I got from my parents were to take care of earth and the people on it, to be of service and lead very much by example.

Joining the company happened quickly. My grandfather passed away in 1997 and my dad in 1998. I was 21 and 22 respectively. This time gave me an opportunity to realize how much the mission of the company was aligned with my own personal
commitment, and that we had a responsibility to my grandfather’s vision as custodians to an amazing legacy. My grandfather had a word for it, constructive capitalism. You share the profits you made, with your workers and the world.

PMAG: How did Dr. Bronner’s become involved in regenerative agriculture to combat climate change?

MB: We started with organic but then realized that didn’t necessarily make a difference in the farmer’s lives, so Fair Trade was the inevitable next step, and looking outside of our immediate supply chain. We were also working on GMO labeling as a way to stop supporting willful ignorance of spreading pesticides everywhere without looking to the future. Then we realized organic and GMO labeling were facets of the larger scene of regenerative agriculture and the mission to return to a radically traditional view of agriculture.

All this carbon in the environment has been unlocked from the earth, whether from fossil fuels burning or more importantly, through industrial agriculture. Even if we completely stop fossil fuel emissions we’re still left with the carbon out there. Regenerative agricultural practices are involved in carbon sequestration and finding ways agricultural practices can prevent more carbon from escaping and also lock carbon that’s out in the atmosphere now back into the earth.

PMAG: We have a strong commitment to protecting the oceans through the Marine Arctic Peace Sanctuary (MAPS) and were delighted to learn of your sponsorship with Sea Shepherd. Why is protecting the oceans so important to Dr. Bronner’s?

MB: If you look at the surface area of the world and the surface area of land and the oceans, you realize that we have a lot to lose if the oceans die.

We have always respected the Sea Shepherd approach to activism; it is it is not enough to inform, you actually have to roll up your sleeves and do the work. Dr. Bronner’s Germany introduced us to the German Chapter of Sea Shepherd three years ago. We found we had so much of a common mission we starting supplying their ships with soap and coconut oil. When we were offered the opportunity to purchase a ship for a campaign in Germany, patrolling the Baltic Sea and protecting harbour porpoises, it was an easy decision. The German chapter has some of the most fervent supporters and volunteers, but they never got to go out to sea.

Our family heritage is German so to have such an impact for a great organization in Germany is a great honor for us. It’s a huge honor to know a ship with my grandfather’s name is patrolling the Baltic Sea and protecting porpoises. I can’t put it into words how it feels to be aligned with such an amazing organization that is going right to the source, enforcing marine law and shining a light on illegal practices. It is great to realize a small group of dedicated individuals can really incur substantial change.

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Michael Bronner is president of Dr. Bronner’s, the top-selling brand of natural soaps in North America. A fifth generation soap maker, he is the grandson of company founder Emanuel Bronner, and is primarily responsible for the company’s international expansion. Under the leadership of Michael and his brother David, the brand has grown from $4 million in 1998 to just under $106 million in annual revenue in 2016. His grandfather’s Cosmic Principles and All-One Mission continue to guide the company today.