PARIS, Oct 17, 2007 (AFP) - At Paris's Ethical Fashion Show, currently the world's largest event spotlighting eco and fair-trade fashion, California's Maia Anderson concluded her first European order, for a store in London.

"I think Brits like well-designed but down-to-earth urban wear," she said of her Convoy label clothing made of recycled, organic and sustainably grown materials. "But tell me, why London or Switzerland, why not orders for Paris?"

It was Anderson's first time at the burgeoning yearly Paris show, held on the heels of the city's high-end Fashion Week, and which since its first 2004 edition has grown from 20 designers to 75 from all of the world's continents.

Every one of the designs displayed at the four-day event was made with either environmental and social concerns at heart, the makers committing to a charter to respect working conditions, protect the environment and preserve traditional skills.

But though the event clearly is attracting widening interest, the question even the organisers were asking was whether ethical fashion was really taking off? And if so, where?

Judith Condor-Vidal, a Britain-based specialist of alpaca wool from coops in Peru and Bolivia whose shawls, hats and gloves are knitted by 390 women there, in 2006 took home a prize from France's mail-order giant La Redoute, the country's second biggest seller of women's wear, with 18 million customers.

"This will get us into the French market for the first time," said Condor-Vidal, who has sold out collections in Top Shop, a retail chain giant in Britain, where ethical fashion is winning a place in the hearts and minds of the consumer.
In France, hypermarket chains such as Monoprix and Carrefour are featuring ethical fashion designers and also produce house brand organic cotton T-shirts. But the buzz has yet to hit the streets.

"Frankly," said Florence Godinho, owner of a boutique in an upscale western Paris suburb, "though I'm interested in the whole ethical fashion thing, my customers know little about organic cotton and don't seem interested in the women's coops in India or Kenya who make the clothing."

"I'm looking for a couple of labels to sell in my store," she said at the event, "but I have little demand for organic anything."

Even mighty La Redoute sees a snail's progress ahead for now. "Mentalities are changing here, but slowly and not at any price," said Elisebeth Cazorla, the firm's ethical fashion head.

"Consumers must be able to wear the product to buy it, and the fact that it is fair trade is secondary," she said. "In spite of steps we and others have taken, the move to ethical fashion has been much slower here than in London."

Retail giant Monoprix says its use of organic cotton, bought from India through a cooperative giant in Switzerland, more than doubled from 107 tonnes in 2005 to 247 tonnes in 2006.

But Monoprix did not attend the Ethical Fashion Show. "A label that says organic cotton tells consumers that is a good quality product, but not much more," said press officer Anais Lannes. "We have 68 ethical fashion references, but more must be done to raise the awareness level."

In London, ethical fashion has benefited from the hype, with celebs wearing the clothing and causing a buzz, said Kate Carter, who writes about fashion for British daily The Guardian.

"The British love all that, and they like looking different also," she said. "The French look gorgeous, but sometimes they all look the same. In London, all the retailers have jumped on ethical fashion. Here in Paris, no."

By Brett Kline