

Fashion Crimes

the cruelty of the fur industry

by Justin Kerswell,
Campaigns Manager, Viva!

With sections by Juliet Gellatley, Founder & Director, Viva!

Published in 2009



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**THE BIG
COVER UP**

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Mirroring the way that billions of animals world wide are factory-farmed for meat, millions of animals are also reared in the most appalling conditions, killed in ways that should outrage and sicken any normal individual – all for trivial items no one needs. The reasons for producing fur are so crass – the excuses used to defend it so contrived and threadbare – it is extraordinary that this is an issue in the 21st Century at all. There shouldn't be a debate – it should invoke automatic revulsion and rejection.

The fact that leg hold traps used to catch most animals in the wild have been banned in 88 countries on the grounds of unacceptable and extreme cruelty – and that fur farming has been banned in the UK, and some other European countries, without so much as a public whimper, shows the feeling of outrage against fur is widespread.

Fur farming and the wearing of fur is obscene – and a ban is long overdue.

State of the Global Fur Industry

Eighty five per cent of the world's fur originates from farms (RSPCA). The fur industry attempts to defend its trade by saying fur farms are well regulated. Most production is now in Scandinavia, Eastern European countries, the USA and China – with the latter being the largest exporter of fur to the USA and Europe, according to the International Fur Trade Federation (IFTF).

According to IFTF, by 2007 global fur sales had increased for an eighth consecutive year, reaching a figure of US\$15 billion (IFTF, 2008). Global retail sales of full fur garments, trim and accessories showed an 11 per cent increase on the previous year's results. The IFTF boasts that this increase is shown by the growing prevalence of fur on the world's catwalks during the autumn/winter 2008-2009 shows.

However, the global slowdown appears to be affecting the industry. Evidenced by the 2009 auctions at Copenhagen Fur in Denmark, one of the world's largest fur auction houses, where pelt prices are down about 30 per cent from 2008 (*Wall Street Journal*, 2009). It is too early to see if this downward trend will continue, and whether it will affect every section of the industry.



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These foxes on a farm in Sweden are denied all that is natural in these tiny cages

The Fur Trade in Britain

Sadly, whilst fur farming itself is banned in Britain, like foie-gras and white veal (also illegal to produce in this country), it is not illegal to import fur. Animals are also no longer trapped in the wild in the UK for fur production, but in the past this trade saw the extinction of species from the British Isles including the beaver (*The Southern Reporter*, 2008).

It would be a mistake to assume that the fur trade is in decline in Britain. Whilst high profile campaigns in the 1990s rightly turned the public against it, the subsequent decline in sales has slowed and in recent years fur has once again risen in popularity. Sadly, once the preserve of the rich and middle-aged, fur is increasingly being marketed to, and sported by, a younger market.

Figures show a thousand tons of fur (worth around £41m) was imported into Britain in 2005. At that time, the British Fur Trade Association (BFTA) claimed that retail sales had risen by around a third in two years (*The Independent*, 2006). According to some fur sellers, the UK is the fastest growing market for fur in Europe (*Financial Times*, 2006). The fur trade now claims Britain is one of the fastest-growing markets in the world (*The Times*, 2007).

According to the BFTA the fur market in the UK is worth around £500 million annually. To put this into perspective, that figure is about half the USA market but with the UK having only a fifth of the population (Fur Commission USA, 2007). Whilst most leading high street chains still shun fur (and have policies against using it), several high profile companies including Harrods, Joseph and Dune (and smaller boutique style shops), as well as market stalls, still sell it in varying amounts. There is a danger that if fur continues to

become 'socially acceptable' that more UK businesses may relax their policies against fur or do away with them altogether.

Whilst most people still imagine fur is used mainly in full length coats and hats, the fur trade has made increasing attempts to diversify, using real fur as trim on all sorts of items – such as boots, scarves, and coats. This has led to many British consumers purchasing what they thought was fake fur. Sometimes real fur is shaved or dyed so may not look real. Fur is also used on items other than clothes, including toy animals, novelty gifts and toys for companion animals. Fur trimmed garments are sold widely on market stalls and other difficult to monitor outlets.

Labelling

There is no legal obligation for UK retailers or makers to label real fur. In December 2006, working with campaign group Respect for Animals, trading standards officers in Surrey analysed toys, cushion covers, scarves, belts, hats and boots. The results showed 55 per cent of the products tested contained animal fur but fewer than 17 per cent of those were labelled as such (*BBC News Online*, 2007). In 2007, the RSPCA carried out an investigation into retailers and found arctic fox fur, labelled as polyester and nylon at TK Maxx, and rabbit fur labelled as acrylic at another chain (*Daily Mail*, 2007). The RSPCA believe the problem is widespread. This non-existent labelling or mislabelling leads consumers to purchase fur products, without realising they are doing so and in turn, fuels the fur trade.

Origin Assured (OA™) fur was launched in 2006 as a joint initiative involving The International Fur Trade Federation (IFTF), Copenhagen Fur, American Legend Cooperative, Finnish Fur Sales/SAGA Furs and North American Fur Auctions. This supposedly guarantees consumers know the country of origin the fur they buy comes from "... a country where national or local welfare regulations or standards are in force". Seeing that this is not mandatory, and seeing as the factory farming of animals for fur is condoned in those countries, this is hardly reassuring.

Cat and dog fur

Shockingly, until December 31, 2008 Britain was a major importer of cat and dog fur from China, with many consumers unwittingly driving the trade by buying products containing it. There are no animal welfare laws in China, and slaughter is often horrific with cats strangled outside their cages as others look on, and dogs noosed with metal wires slashed across their groin until they bleed to death as a wire noose cuts into their throat. Many animals are skinned alive. It takes up to 10 adult dogs or 24 cats to make a fur coat. Spearheaded by Viva! patron Heather Mills, the outcry against this was such, that the EU agreed to ban all imports of cat and dog fur from China in June 2007 (*BBC News Online*, 2007). Now in force, it is estimated this move will save the lives of two million animals.

As Switzerland is outside of the EU, there are fears that it may become a new centre in the trade of cat and dog fur now that the ban has come in – fur blankets have been traditionally produced in the country for rheumatism. Although Switzerland banned the importation of cat fur in 2006, it has not yet banned the production of cat fur – but has promised to do so eventually. There is disagreement about the level of production. The Swiss Federal Veterinary Office argues that amounts are miniscule, but campaigners point to an epidemic of missing domestic animals and say it could be in the tens of thousands (*The Independent*, 2008).

In December 2007, childrens' toys made of cat and dog fur were found for sale in Ireland, containing six times the European recommended amount of chromium – a known carcinogen which can also cause kidney and liver damage (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2007). As cat and dog fur has often been mislabelled, despite the best efforts of legislators and customs, it is inevitable that some amount of this fur will continue to be imported into Britain, despite the ban. The only way to be sure to avoid cat and dog fur, is to refuse to buy any real fur product, and to check faux fur carefully.

Factory farming for fur

Around 85 per cent of fur comes from intensive farms, where essentially wild animals are caged and are unable to carry out natural behaviours. Rabbit, mink and fox are the most commonly bred animals, although chinchilla, raccoon dog, polecat, ferret and coypu are also farmed and skinned for the fashion industry. According to the RSPCA, already in excess of 55 million animals are killed annually for their fur (*Daily Mail*, 2007), but the fur trade boom of the last few years is having inevitable results: more animals being caught in the wild and more animals being subjected to inhumane intensive indoor rearing.

In 1989 the British Farm Animal Welfare Council described mink and fox as “essentially wild animals” and expressed its disapproval of their farming stating: “the systems employed in the farming of mink and fox do not satisfy some of the most basic criteria for protecting the welfare of farm animals.” It was this, and pressure from animal welfare groups, that saw the ban of fur farming in the UK in 2003. However, imports of fur into the UK continued.

An unfortunate side-effect of the UK ban was the growth of fur farming in the Republic of Ireland, where the practice is still legal. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in Ireland estimates there are more than 40,000 breeding mink in the country, with more than 166,000 being killed each year, as well as 600 foxes (*Irish Sunday Times*, 2004 & CIWF Ireland).

As animals are not now farmed for fur in this country, it means those whose furs are imported have no protection under UK law (minimal as it is) and many will be slaughtered in ways that would be illegal here. The primary concern for fur farmers abroad is not animal welfare, it is ensuring that the fur itself is not marked. China has no welfare laws of any kind, but it might come as a surprise that in the USA there is no federal law protecting animals in fur farms at slaughter (PETA fact sheet) (see *Fur farming in the USA and Canada*).



A European ban on seal products would save thousands of animals from extreme suffering

Around 300,000 seals are killed during the annual Canadian slaughter. Britain already bans the importation of furs from seal pups that still have their first white coats, but since seals shed those coats after about 12 days, UK rules still permit the import of furs from very young seals (*The Scotsman*, 2008). Subsequently, Britain imports around a third of all Canadian seal skins into Europe (4.1 tons in 2004) (*The Independent*, 2006). Despite making encouraging noises, the UK Government has not signed to unilaterally ban the importation of all seal skins and products made from them. This is despite Belgium, Slovenia and Holland having already passed legislation banning seal products, while Germany, Italy and Austria are drafting similar legislation (*The Canadian Press*, 2008). However, in July 2008 the UK government welcomed plans for a Europe wide ban on trade in seal products. Canada has launched a challenge to the World Trade Organisation in an effort to persuade the Belgian and Dutch governments to reverse their bans. There were concerns that any ban maybe overturned in favour of training in 'humane slaughter'. However, in March 2009, The European Parliament's internal market and consumer protection committee decided that products derived from seals, "... should be strictly banned throughout the EU" (*Europaparlamentet*, 2009). They did, however, recommend exemptions for Inuit populations (which make up three per cent of the trade in seal derived products). Also, concern was raised that any ban may fall foul of world trade rules. The European Parliament is due to decide on the fate of the proposed ban in April 2009 (also see Fur farming and hunting in the USA and Canada).

Rabbit fur is imported and used in the UK. It is popular because it is relatively cheaper to produce than other types of fur. Many British consumers either don't realise that they are buying rabbit fur or believe that it is a by-product of the meat industry. The reality is that many rabbits are bred only for their fur. Many millions of rabbits are killed for their pelts globally each year (CAFT report, 2007). High street chain Zara took rabbit fur products off the shelves in 2004 in light of worldwide protests, but it is still widely available (see *Fur farming in Europe* for more details).

In the UK, fur imports are subject to the standard 17.5 per cent VAT charges (HMRC, 2008). Each type of product entering the UK has a unique commodity code. This code dictates how much in other charges the product attracts at point of entry into the UK (conventional rate of duty). Trade within the EU is not liable to this duty, but products from outside the EU are. However, raw furskins (including pieces or cuttings suitable for use by furriers) are not liable to this duty even if they come from outside the EU (this includes fur from China). Assembled fur (i.e. fur that has been added to garments) will attract this duty for items from outside the EU. However, for instance, most assembled fur garments (including a mink coat) from outside the EU will only attract a paltry 2.2 per cent conventional duty (*Official Journal of the European Union*), whereas a cotton shirt would attract at duty of 12 per cent. Artificial fur is also charged at a higher rate than real fur, at 3.2 per cent. Clearly the fur industry is being given special breaks within the world trade arena.

However, Europe sets these codes not the UK Government, who could not unilaterally raise these taxes on fur even if there was a will to. To do this would mean campaigning at European level or petitioning the Government to push for it.

Further complicating the issue, if garments enter the UK with a fur trim or other relatively small amount of fur attached, they may be classified as by their majority fabric and not as fur (HMRC classification team). Therefore the amount of fur entering the UK from abroad may be significantly higher than previously thought. It also throws up the question of how the cat and dog fur ban will be regulated if goods entering the UK containing fur are not categorised as such when they pass customs.

HMRC do compile figures for the amount of fur entering the UK according to unique commodity codes which are compiled by a subsidiary (UK Trade Info). What the figures show is that 20,658 more items of fur were imported into the UK in 2005 than 2006 (a total of 1,685,853 in 2006). However, items of fur imported by weight was down by 166,838kg in 2006 compared to 2005 (for a total of 936,387kg). As some types of fur are measured in kg and some by number of items it is relatively difficult to get an accurate picture of the trade. The importation of tanned or dressed furskins (by kg) from Asia and Oceania (including China) has already increased considerably to 316,801 kg (from 228,026kg in 2006) dwarfing the imports (by kg) from the European Union which has fallen from 311,879 kg in 2006 to 175,058kg in 2007. Figures for 2008 do exist – and show a general decrease in the trade – however, these figures are not considered stable for 18 months.

Death by design

The re-emergence of fur in Britain can partly be blamed on its use on the catwalk by British designers and the patronage of celebrities. Associated French Press reported that at 2009's London Fashion Week, despite the global economic slowdown, "... with the exotic feathers, refined prints and the abundance of fur, you could be forgiven for thinking the good times were back." Welsh designer Julien MacDonald uses fur extensively. Referring to complaints about his autumn 2007 collection he said: "People who don't like fur can piss off. I love fur. It's a beautiful natural product from animals" (*Daily Mail*, 2007). The collection was sported by British model Naomi Campbell, who at one time famously took part in the campaign saying that she would rather go naked than wear fur. In 2008, Kate Moss also flaunted her furs in front of the world's media. In 2009 Lily Allen's white fur Prada hat made headlines. In 2006 MacDonald said that his business would collapse if he did not use fur (*Independent*, 2006). This sounds like a crass excuse, but anti-fur designer Sadie Frost said in 2006: "As a designer, I've become aware of how fur is often pushed on you to get financial breaks along the way. I know that a lot of designers who were having problems financially have cleared their debts by using fur" (*Daily Mail*, 2006). This arrangement demonstrates the fur industry is methodically masterminding the re-emergence of fur in Britain through the backdoor. Thankfully, some top British designers have turned their backs on it, including Vivienne Westwood, who went fur-free in 2006 (HSUS, 2006). Also, other top designers, such as Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, and Tommy Hilfiger have pledged to go fur-free – but Giorgio Armani recanted on his promise and was back using fur in 2009. Victoria Beckham has also become a perhaps unlikely anti-fur crusader by refusing to wear real fur.

Unbelievably, some sectors of the trade are now pushing fur as a green product to UK consumers (*The Times*, 2007), this despite a cocktail of chemicals used to treat fur, the feeding of animals, transportation to slaughter, massive energy consumption and other waste associated with the industry. In the USA alone, fur farms generate tens of thousands of tons of waste every year – including slurry, bedding and animal corpses. Fur is about as far away from a green product as you can get, with a farmed-fur requiring about 20 times the energy needed to produce faux fur (*Toronto Street Fashion*).

There is also a growing market in vintage fur, as some see this as a 'guilt-free' way of wearing it. Whilst it is true that the animals killed to make the fur item have been dead a considerable amount of time, there is a danger glamorising and increasing the visibility of fur will lead to greater demand – and the knock on effect of that popularity is that more animals will be killed. This is a view backed up by environmental broadcaster Lucy Siegle, she says, "Despite the practical case for recycling fur the emotive politics remain. If you wear fur as a fashion item – even if it's vintage – there is an argument to say that to some extent you are perpetuating a taste for wearing

real fur.” This is further backed up by the fact that some designers and celebrity tailors are remodelling vintage fur to match what is appearing on the catwalk, blurring the boundaries even more (*Daily Mail*, 2008).

Urgent action is needed to prevent the fur industry in the UK from becoming acceptable to British consumers.

Fur farming in China

China is now the biggest exporter of fur – exporting 95 per cent of what it produces. The EU is the biggest importer. Fur from China will often be labelled as from France or Italy as there is no law to stop this from happening. Most cheap fur for the trim on boots and coats comes from China – that means 1.5 million fox pelts a year and 1.5 million raccoon dog pelts. The Chinese also farm mink, dog and cats.



Fur trim from Europe and China find its way onto clothes in British stores

PhotoSAP

The IFTF states fur farming is well regulated and operates the

‘highest standards of care’. To illustrate how pointless this statement is, China is a member of this federation but currently has no animal welfare laws. Many fur traders are switching to China, where labour is cheap and animal welfare is non-existent.

Footage taken on typical fur farms in China shows animals who have lapsed into extreme stereotyped behaviour – a form of mental collapse due to appalling welfare conditions that are commonplace.

Beautiful white Arctic foxes are kept in totally barren cages barely bigger than the animal – one to cage – row after row – continually pacing round and round in circles. In the wild they would range over 15,000 acres, but here they never leave their cages.

Raccoon dogs (wild animals that are members of the dog family) are also kept in similar conditions, in cramped cages with wide mesh wire flooring, making movement difficult. In the wild these animals walk on average 12 miles a day and are very active, with a wide home range of 100 square km. Raccoon dogs, when they mate, stay together to rear their pups, but on these farms they have no contact with other animals.

Mink are confined in cages no bigger than the size of two shoe boxes. Agile climbers, they continually jump up to push sides of their cages trying to escape. Many show unnatural behaviours, making a circling motion with their head over and over. Mink are semi aquatic animals – they hunt, play, and live much of their lives in water – but on these barren farms they have no access to water other than for drinking. In the wild, mink defend and patrol riverbank territories of up to two and a half miles. Experiments have shown that captive

mink will go to enormous efforts to reach water to swim in. Mink raised for fur are still wild animals, with no captive line being older than 100 years.

Fear in these animals leads to abnormal behaviours, stress, and infanticide in nursing mothers. All commonplace on Chinese fur farms, as is self mutilation. The death rate of young is as great as 50 per cent – again an indicator of very poor conditions. Animals are transported many miles to markets, where the fur traders buy the pelts.

To illustrate the awful conditions on Chinese fur farms, disturbing undercover footage by Swiss Animal Protection/East International shows raccoon dogs taken out of their cages; to stun them the men swing the animals and slam their heads on the ground – sometimes again and again. The footage shows raccoon dogs coming around and then being bludgeoned with wooden poles again and again – supposedly to kill them without marking their fur.

Animals are then skinned, many of them whilst they are fully conscious. The same footage shows a man cutting into a racoon dog's belly, in pain and panic the animal tries to bite him, but the man just stamps on his neck and carries on. The racoon dog is hung up by hind legs and the man starts to pull the animal's skin off – the racoon dog goes frantic trying to escape. After having the whole skin pulled off the animal is still alive, lifting his head up and down. He is left to die, which takes an excruciating 10 minutes.

As China exports almost all the fur it produces, blame not only lies at their door, but also the rest of the world for creating a market for this butchery. (also see *Cat and dog fur*)

Fur farming in Europe

There are 6,500 fur farms in the EU. The industry employs 143,000 skilled people within the EU, and nearly 1.5 million outside of the EU (IFTF). Europe is responsible for 70 per cent of global mink fur production (with Denmark alone the world's largest mink producer, accounting for about 27 per cent of total global

production), and 63 per cent of fox fur production. Chinchilla, fitch, sable and fin racoon are bred on a smaller scale (European Fur Breeder's Association). In the EU, the countries that farm the most animals for their fur are Denmark, the Netherlands and Finland (with the trade in the latter country alone being worth 250 million Euros annually) (Animal Aid & Reuters). However, in Switzerland, stringent legislation prevents cage-rearing of animals and, in the Netherlands, farming of foxes and chinchillas has now been banned

Millions of rabbits are slaughtered in the EU for their pelts every year



(Advocates for Animals). In 1998, Austria became the first country in the world to prohibit fur farming (Association Against Animal Factories).

Fur farms in Europe are very similar to ones in China, with the majority of animals confined to small cages, the main difference is the slaughter methods used. As with all fur farming, more care is taken at slaughter to protect the coat of the animal rather than to lessen their suffering. Common methods used on European farms include electrocution by inserting one electrode into the anus and another into the mouth. Also gassing, neck dislocation, lethal injection and neck cutting are sometimes used.

According to a 2007 report by Coalition to Abolish the Fur Trade (CAFT) rabbit farming is the fastest growing section of the fur industry, and Europe is at the heart of it (Faculty for Natural Science (Norway)) (although, like other types, it is increasingly moving to China). CAFT found it difficult to get reliable figures, but a 1997 report by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations said that France's annual rabbit skin production is over 70 million pelts. It also lists Spain and Italy as being the other two main European producers. The reality is that many rabbits are bred only for their fur (such as the Rex breed). Rabbits bred for meat tend to be killed at around 10-12 weeks, but their coats are not very thick by that time. Rabbits bred for fur are kept in cramped cages and killed at several months old when their coat has developed (Respect for Animals). Rabbits bred for this purpose suffer a high mortality (between 10-15 per cent). They are slaughtered by being stunned, hung up on hooks and having their throats cut. An undercover investigation into European fur farming by CAFT found many shortfalls in welfare at slaughter, with incorrect stunning and animals regaining consciousness as they bled to death. CAFT's report estimated that over a billion rabbits are killed for their pelts globally each year.

Mink farms were deemed so cruel that they were banned in UK in 2003. However, whilst the farming of fur is banned in the UK, there is no law to stop fur being imported into this country and the market here is growing (see *The Fur Trade in Britain*).

Fur farming and hunting in the USA and Canada

Not all fur comes from factory farms, the rest comes from animals trapped or hunted in the wild, with around 10 million animals being trapped in the wild each year (Faculty for Natural Science (Norway)). Traps are used partly because they don't damage the fur. Most trappers are in countries such as the USA, Canada and Russia – and many trap for fun.

The leg hold trap is still used the most in Canada and the USA despite it being banned (or its use severely restricted) because of its cruelty in eight American states (HSUS, 2009). The trap is designed to slam shut on an animal's leg as he or she stands on it. The fur industry say trapping animals is sustainable wildlife management, but as usual the real reason is the destruction of wild animals for profit. Traps are totally indiscriminate, catching any animal that has the bad luck of walking on that trail or taking the bait. For every mink coat made from wild trapped mink, 60 mink will have died but the trap will also have maimed and



Photo©CAFT

Traps are indiscriminate. Both wild and companion animals can fall victim

killed at least another 180 animals – from golden eagles to pet dogs. As the fur industry grows, more animals are being trapped in the wild. Licensed fur trappers in the US state of Oregon more than doubled for the 2007–08 trapping season (*The New West*, 2008). Not only are more animals being caught for fur, but the numbers of other wild animals and companion animals being accidentally snared has increased significantly also.

There have been various hearings on trapping in the USA in an attempt to ban it in the remaining states that still allow it. The testimonies are hard reading. Canadian and former trapper, Raven Wilson said “You had a club and bashed the animal’s head. It’s cruel, it’s horrible. People think it’s romantic it’s not. If people saw their dog in a trap like that, they’d never wear fur again.” Another man who gave evidence, talks of a hunter killing a trapped coyote – clubbing the animal on the nose and then stamping on the neck, and, with the other foot, thumping the animal in chest, over and over.

Hundreds of thousands of seals are killed in the wild during the annual Canadian slaughter for their meat but more specifically for their furs. In 2008, the total allowable catch set by the Canadian government was 275,000 harp seals, (the quota include 2,000 seals for personal seal hunting, and 4,950 seals for the Inuit seal hunt) (*SouWester*, 2008), 8,200 hooded seals (*Telegraph*, 2008) and 12,000 grey seals (*The Canadian Press*, 2008). Although hunting is supposedly controlled by these quota regulations, based on international recommendations by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), sealers exceeded their quota by a thousand animals in one area alone in 2006 (CBS). The annual seal slaughter is often attributed to the Canadian cod crisis, whereas the truth is that cod stocks crashed because of over fishing and not an increased seal population.



Hundreds of thousands of seals are killed each year around Canada in a state sanctioned massacre

Photo © Humane Society of the United States

Seals are killed with a club – or haka-pik – before being skinned. Phyllis Campbell McRae of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) compares the practice to “smacking a puppy on the head with a hammer” and claimed that many seals are still alive when skinned. In December 2007, an EU scientific panel accepted a report from the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) which determined there was strong evidence that some seals die a slow and painful death, which includes bleeding and skinning while there are signs of life (*The Western Star*, 2006). In light of this several European countries have banned seal imports, and an EU wide ban could be implemented in the next 18 months.

Whilst Canada has voluntarily banned the hunting of the youngest seals (known as white coats), official Canadian government kill reports show 97 per cent of the seals killed over the past five years have been under three months of age, and the majority has been less than one month old (HSUS, 2005). An unlikely saviour of some Canadian seals is the economic slowdown, which has seen quotas unfilled in certain areas because of a collapse in pelt prices (Canada.com, 2009).



Photo©PETA

In Canada and the USA, there are also 1,135 fur farms producing mainly mink, but also some fox and chinchilla. Canada produces around 1.5 million mink pelts on fur farms annually. In the USA, some 330 mink farms across 28 states produce around 2.6 million pelts annually – worth around US\$86 million (Faculty for Natural Science (Norway)). Increasingly, mink pelts from the USA are being shipped to China, and are reshipped back to Western markets as finished garments.

The US has no federal law protecting animals in fur farms at slaughter (PETA). This means some small animals may be crammed into boxes and poisoned with exhaust fumes from a vehicle. This is not always successful and some animals are skinned alive. Larger animals can have clamps attached to or rods forced into their mouths and rods forced into their anuses – they are painfully electrocuted. The only US state where anal electrocution is now illegal is New York, which banned it in April 2008 (Associated Press, 2008). Some are poisoned with strychnine, which suffocates them by paralyzing muscles with painful, rigid cramps. Neck breaking, gassing, and decompression chambers are other slaughter methods commonly used in fur factory farms in the USA.

Disappearing wildlife: the fur industry to blame?

The fur industry – like every industry that exploits and kills wild animals – try to disguise the obscenity of their trade by saying they manage a resource. Sustainability is a word you will hear over and over again. Don't be fooled. Hunting animals – whether it is for fur, skin or horn or phoney medicines, the results are the same – disastrous for the targeted species.

Take the tiger. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) reports this most charismatic of the big cats has reduced in numbers by 95 per cent in the last 100 years – because of hunting for its fur; Chinese medicine and habitat

loss. The group – which has people on the ground trying to stop poaching – show the fur trade is partly responsible for the tiger's demise to only 5,000 or so animals in the wild. People are still trying to illegally kill tigers for fur. In 2006, a report by the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) and the Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI) found the illegal tiger and leopard fur trade continues to thrive in China (Mongabay.com). The organisations said: "the trade is operating without any hindrance from the Chinese government" and endangers surviving wild tiger populations in India. They said tiger furs were freely available on some stalls in China, and the trade – that is operated by highly organised criminal gangs – is being ignored, or even condoned, by politicians. China is now pushing for factory farming of tigers, mirroring the unnatural and cruel ways other animals raised for fur are kept.

When mother tigers are caught, their cubs cannot hunt alone until one year old and do not fend for themselves until they are two to five years old depending on species. This is hidden suffering of all trapping – including legal trapping when mothers are caught the babies will die too.

The Snow Leopard, the WWF say, has suffered a similar fate and again they blame very firmly hunters for fur. Even Polar Bears don't escape the trade – with 8ft polar bear rugs available on the internet for shipping to the UK for as little as £6,300 (*The Sun*, 2009). Although the fur trade will say it is against hunting endangered species – it is their trade that caused these animals to be put on the endangered list and it is the demand for fur that causes them to be poached for large sums of money. When wild animals are exploited – an industry is set up to do that killing, processing and selling. No matter what the decline is in numbers of animals, the industry will continue until there are none left. They do not want to lower production – especially if the price becomes higher as the species becomes rarer. The sustainability argument is used in Australia by the kangaroo industry – yet they target the largest and fittest individual as they have larger skins – which is the opposite of what would be done if population control was the genuine motive. As a result, large red kangaroos are rarely spotted and the population has crashed. For more on the trade in kangaroo skins see Viva!'s website www.savethekangaroo.com.

The fur industry often tries to justify itself as a guardian of wildlife, preying on fears that a species may get out of hand without human intervention. This is a sick joke when the exact opposite is true. Nature finds its own balance and has done for millions of years. A good example of this is the Quebec Park, where beavers were protected from trapping. There were fears of a population explosion, but numbers naturally stabilised when they reached 60 per cent capacity. Nature has the perfect ability to self regulate, interference from man always leads to disaster.

Boycott fur

If you buy fur – even without realising it – you are supporting a barbaric industry. A ban and a mass consumer boycott are needed now more than ever.

Our willingness to ban fur is an important litmus test of our willingness to acknowledge our incredible cruelty and destructiveness – and change while we still can. The philosophy of allowing people to do what they like to the planet and all its inhabitants is what has landed us in a desperate environmental and animal welfare position.

If we can't take a resounding stand against this, what will we take a stand against? It really will signal that there is little hope for any of the world's animals – including us.

You can do your bit by vowing not to buy fur, and asking everyone you know to do the same.

Alternatives

Cruelty-free fur alternatives exist and you don't have to look hard to find them. However, as this report states, how do you know that fake fur is really fake? Some fakes look so like the real thing that some people will think they are – so could you be promoting the wearing of real fur by accident? If in doubt leave it out.

Check the labels, if products contain fur – don't buy them, but also write the company a letter telling them why! Use your consumer power to tell companies that animals are not commodities to be exploited.

What you can do:

- Don't buy or wear fur
- Educate your friends and family about fur and ask them not to buy it in future
- Order a free pack of Viva!'s *The Big Cover Up* leaflets to distribute
- Write to businesses and ask them to reconsider using fur in their products
- Write to your local newspaper regarding fur production
- Visit www.thebigcoverup.org.uk for more ideas of how you can get involved



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