

What's Wrong with Leather?

Animals whose skins are turned into leather are killed either directly for their hides or for their hides, flesh, and other parts. While taking a sentient animal's life is in itself wrong, the abuses and cruelties the animals suffer offer more reason to shun leather. After pigs and cows have suffered from the crowding, confinement, mutilations, stressful transport, and frightening slaughter at the hands of the meat and dairy industries, their skins are made into shoes, boots, belts, gloves, and furniture covers. Skin accounts for more than 55 percent of the total byproduct value of cattle. Horses, sheep, lambs, and goats are also slaughtered for their meat, as well as for their hides. Many people believe that leather is just a byproduct of the meat industry and that animals are not killed solely for their skin, but this is not always the case. Some of the leather in athletic shoes, for example, comes from kangaroos who are killed for nothing more than their skin.

Animals in other countries also suffer for leather sold in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Europe. India is a major leather supplier to the world market. Because cow slaughter is only legal in certain parts of India, the animals must be marched to those areas for slaughter, often a journey of hundreds of miles. Hot chili peppers and tobacco are often rubbed into their eyes, and their tail bones are painfully twisted and broken in order to make these exhausted animals stand up and keep moving. Many of the Indian cows used for leather are so sick and injured by the time they arrive at the slaughterhouse that they must be dragged inside.

Leather production is hazardous to the environment. Toxins that are emitted from leather tanneries endanger human and ecological health by polluting regional waterways with mineral salts, formaldehyde, coal-tar derivatives, oils, dyes, salt, lime sludge, sulfides, and acids. Residents of tannery towns have a greater-than-average chance of developing leukemia, and more than half of all tannery workers develop testicular cancer.

The leather industry uses an enormous amount of energy. Huge amounts of fossil fuels are consumed in raising, transporting, and killing the animals who are skinned for leather. Synthetics such as fleece and vinyl actually require fewer petroleum products to produce.

Alternatives to Leather...

Most leather items have obvious and readily available alternatives. Most cars are available without leather interiors, though BMW and Mercedes are the only luxury cars to offer non-leather interiors on all of their models. Pleather (fake leather) jackets are available, or go with cotton hoodies, or Gore-Tex or fleece jackets. Nylon, canvas, vinyl, or pleather can replace leather in bags and briefcases. Most running shoes and many cross-trainers are all-synthetic.

Look for "all man-made materials" on the tag. **Most shoes come with either a stitched-in tag or a sticker on the insole with symbols denoting what the shoe is made from. Diamonds and checkerboard shapes mean plastic and cloth, respectively. If you see a drawing that looks like a stretched animal hide, the shoes contain leather.** Many stores remove the sticker from display shoes, so ask them to find one in the back room that still contains the tag.

Brands such as Merrell, Vasque, and New Balance, to name a few, make non-leather athletic and hiking shoes – available at stores such as REI and other outdoor clothing stores. Circa, ES, Etnies, Vans, Osiris, Fallen, and Ipath all make non-leather skate shoes, though they are not always available. Check Journeys, Zumiez, and other skate shops. Macbeth makes a line of all vegan shoes; they even say vegan on the insole. Look for the green "V" shape on the Macbeth tag. Non-leather dress shoes can often be found at PayLess Shoes and Baker's, or on the web. Birkenstock, Teva, and others make non-leather sandals. Most flip flops are vegan and provide inexpensive summer footwear. Converse, Vans, and others make non-leather canvas shoes as well. For a list of non-leather products, visit: www.vrg.org/nutshell/leather.htm

What about Down?

Down is the soft feathers of ducks and geese. Most birds used for down live on factory farms and must endure rough handling throughout their lives, especially when they have their feathers ripped from their chests during pluckings. A goose may live through four or five pluckings before he or she is slaughtered. When it becomes more expensive to keep the animals than their feathers are worth, the animals are killed.

Synthetic alternatives to down are cheaper and perform better at blocking the cold than feathers. When wet, down becomes waterlogged and fails to insulate and remain comfortable. Make sure to avoid down when buying jackets, comforters, sleeping bags, and pillows. Alternatives are readily available.

What about Silk?

Silkworms make their cocoons from a shiny fiber that they produce. To obtain silk, the worms are boiled or steamed alive by the thousands. Alternatives include rayon and nylon.

What's Wrong with Wool?

U.S. textile mills use nearly four times more imported than domestically-produced wool. Much of it comes from Australia. With 118 million sheep, Australia is the world's top wool producer and exporter.

Within weeks of birth, lambs' ears are hole-punched, and the males are castrated without anesthetics. Extremely high rates of mortality are considered normal on Australian wool farms. 20 to 40 percent of lambs die before the age of 8 weeks, and 8 million mature sheep die every year from disease, exposure, or neglect.

Australian ranchers mainly raise Merino sheep, who are not native to Australia and therefore do not fare well in the harsh conditions. Merinos are bred to have extremely wrinkly skin (which allows for more wool). This unnatural overload of wool causes animals to die of heat exhaustion during summers. The wrinkles collect moisture, which attracts flies and results in maggot infestation known as flystrike. Maggots can literally eat sheep alive, so in order to reduce flystrike, ranchers perform a crude operation known as mulesing. Mulesing involves carving wide strips of skin from around the lambs' tails to produce smooth scars that won't harbor fly larvae. Tail docking (cutting off the sheep's tails) is often done in conjunction with mulesing to reduce feces and urine stains on the wool. Both mutilations are currently performed without the use of anesthesia; however, a new drug called Tri-Solfen is being introduced and used by some farmers to reduce pain during mulesing. Unfortunately, the maker of the drug, Bayer, tests the product and many of its other products on animals. Ironically, because of the large bloody wounds caused by mulesing and tail docking, sheep often get flystrike before they heal.

According to Australian Law Reform chairperson M.D. Kirby, each year Australian sheep endure more than 50 million operations, such as mulesing and tooth-grinding, that would constitute animal cruelty if performed on dogs or cats. Many people believe that shearing brings relief to animals that would otherwise be too hot. This is true if done in the summer, but in order to avoid losing any wool, ranchers shear sheep before they would naturally shed their winter coats, resulting in many sheep dying from exposure to the cold.

When sheep are no longer profitable for wool production, they are slaughtered. They are exported in 14-tiered ships from Australia to the Middle East, a three- to six-week trip during which up to 18 percent of the animals die from the cramped and filthy conditions. Millions of sheep endure this transport every year, after which they are ritually slaughtered while fully conscious.

Sheep exploited for wool in the U.S. also suffer from inhumane handling and transportation, and they too often face cruel ritual slaughter when they are no longer profitable to the wool industry. Sheep raised in the U.S. do not suffer the agony of live export to the Middle East, but they do suffer the same cruelties of wool production, including painful mutilations that are often done with little or no anesthesia.

Most U.S.-raised sheep and lambs are either raised on factory farms, where they spend their entire lives in filthy manure-filled warehouses, or they are raised "on the range" without any shelter from extreme weather conditions. Thousands of lambs and sheep die every year from harsh conditions. Thousands more die in transport, during which sheep are severely overcrowded onto trucks. The non-profit organization Farm Sanctuary has documented dozens of cases of "downed" sheep at auctions and stockyards. Sheep and lambs too weak to even stand are often abandoned on dead piles and left to die slowly from neglect. After a lifetime of producing wool, sheep are sent to slaughter. The U.S. slaughters 3 million sheep every year.

Alternatives to Wool...

There are many great alternatives to wool. Warm and fashionable sweaters made from cotton, fleece, acrylic, and ramie are readily available. For hiking or cold weather, try Patagonia Capaline or other similar synthetic long underwear, gloves, socks, blankets, etc. Knit polyester, acrylic, or fleece can easily replace wool in hats and beanies. Gore-Tex or other water-resistant synthetics work well in place of wool pants. Polyester, rayon, linen, microfiber, and other synthetics can replace wool suits, sport coats, and blazers.

"To my mind, the life of a lamb is no less precious than that of a human being."

- Mahatma Gandhi



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