

LEATHER: NOT AN INNOCENT BY-PRODUCT

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The power of denial is deep and vast and huge. We're really good at denying reality, and one of the ways we do this is through the excuses we need to tell ourselves in order to not only do what we do but also to feel good about doing it. The most common of which is "Leather is just a byproduct of the meat industry. At least they're doing something with the left-over parts of the animals instead of having it just go to waste." So let's address this idea that leather is just an innocent by-product of the meat industry.

The U.S. leather industry is a \$1.5 billion business tanning over 100 million animal skins every year. But worldwide, it's even bigger than that, and it's a booming industry. According to the World Trade Organization, the leather sector represents US \$46 billion, ranking among the most important internationally traded commodities. (That's 18 billion square feet of leather a year.)

- *Leather Council*: <http://www.leathercouncil.org/perspective.htm>

What most people don't understand is that the meat industry is not sustainable on its own. It relies on skin sales to remain profitable. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the skin represents the most economically important byproduct of the meat-packing industry.

**Animal skins account for 55 to 60%
of the byproduct value of cattle.**

In other words, the leather industry essentially subsidizes the meat industry. At the same time, the leather industry is directly dependent on the meat industry. It does not exist in a moral vacuum. It's a business that exists to make money.

So, let's not give credit to an industry that relies on the suffering and death of billions of animals in order to make a pretty handsome profit.

The worth of the animal is the worth of the whole animal, not just the meat, and if we stopped using leather products, and gelatin, and other animal by-products, the cost of meat would soar to an unattainable level for most people, effectively crippling the beef industry.

TYPES OF LEATHER AND SKIN PRODUCTS

- **SLINK SKINS OR SLUNK SKINS:** The word slink means to 'bring forth young prematurely.'

Slink or slunk skins are from unborn or prematurely born calves or lambs.

This is considered the softest of all leather. The label will most likely say "calf leather," which doesn't often give people pause, even though they know calves are babies, but it might give them pause if they knew that the skin is from babies who were calves who were still inside their mothers when she was killed. And these skins are broken down into three categories:

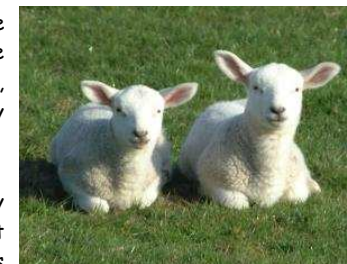
- 1) Skin that is from early stage fetuses with very, very short hair.
- 2) Skin that is from medium stage fetuses with very short hair.
- 3) Skin that is from late stage unborn calves with longer hair.



graphic c/o www.farmsanctuary.org

- **BUCKSKIN:** Also called "brained leather," it is a tanning process that uses animal brains or other fatty materials, including egg yolks, to alter the leather. It can be made from any of the hooved animals but is mostly made from deer.
- **PATENT LEATHER:** is leather that has been given a high-gloss finish and usually has a plastic coating.
- **RAWHIDE:** This refers to a particular tanning process and tends to be used for drum making, lampshades, snowshoe webbing,
- **VELLUM:** Originally, vellum or "parchment" was prepared from the skins of stillborn animals. Sometimes, goatskin or sheepskin was used. Besides being used for writing, vellum, or parchment, was used to make drumheads and lampshades. The pages of ancient and rare antique books were most likely made from the skins of calves.

- **SUEDE:** Suede leather is made from the under side of the skin, primarily lamb, but goat, pig, calf and deer are commonly used.



graphic c/o www.freefoto.com

- **SHEARLING:** contrary to many people's conceptions, is not sheared wool; the term refers to a yearling lamb who has been shorn once. (A yearling is an animal who is in his first year of life.) A shearling garment is made from the skin of a lamb shorn shortly before slaughter; the skin is tanned with the wool still on it.

ANIMALS USED

- **BULLS AND STEERS:** So, obviously, the largest animals with the toughest skins are the prized when it comes to who will be used for leather. Bulls' tend to be used for the soles of shoes, and the skin from calves, as I said, is highly prized, because it's so soft.
- **DAIRY COWS:** So, because dairy cows are all killed at the end of their "profitability cycle" (when they can't produce enough milk to justify spending money to keep them alive), they're killed for "meat" and their skin. These cows are killed whether they're pregnant or not, and the dead calves are taken from their mothers' mutilated bodies and used to make the soft leather. So, mother and baby - both used for leather. Again, the economic success of slaughterhouses and dairy farms are directly linked to the sale of leather goods.
- **PIGS:** Pigskin is used in apparel and on seats of saddles. Though early footballs used to be made from the skin of pigs, it seems that the skin of cattle is mostly used these days. The name "pigskin" to refer to a football also refers to the fact that in early days, inflated pig's bladders were used as balls.
- **GOATS:** Even more prized for their skin than lambs and sheep are goats. In fact, the skins of baby goats are prized for their softness, just as that from baby lambs and calves, and of course, "kid gloves" refers to the fact that gloves owe their softness to the fact that they're made from the skin of baby goats.
- **WILD ANIMALS:** Now, even though the slaughter industry relies on the leather industry to be profitable, that doesn't mean other animals are safe. Quite the contrary. Some animals in the U.S., such as deer, sharks and alligators are killed just for their skins, and animals killed outside the U.S. can include zebras, bison, water buffaloes, kangaroos, elephants, eels, dolphins, seals, walruses, frogs, crocodiles and lizards. Apparently, snakeskin comes from snakes skinned alive in the widespread belief that the life-blood in the skin keeps the skin supple until tanning.

• **HORSES:** Horses are killed for human consumption, but their use extends beyond that, as well, being used as human transportation, novelty rides, and horseracing. Wild horses are also slaughtered, as a way of making room for cattle-grazing. Cordovan is a kind of leather made from horses, specifically the tight portion of their backsides.

• **KANGAROOS:** Australia exports approximately 3 million kangaroo skins every year. The vast majority of these skins are used to make soccer shoes/sneakers, some are used for golf gloves, baseball mitts and other sports goods. You won't see "Kangaroo" on the label, but you will see "K leather" or "RKT," (rubberized kangaroo technology). In 2007, the quota was 3.8 million kangaroos.

Apparently, between 50-80% of all kangaroos shot are female, many of whom either have one or two joeys (baby kangaroos) in their pouch and/or "at foot." Attempts to promote kangaroo meat in the United Kingdom failed because of widespread publicity about the cruelty, and also because of the health risks. (Kangaroo meat carries high burdens of internal abdominal and muscular parasites.) So, this is a case where the butchering of wild animals is done solely for their skin. This is also the case with the baby harp seals being killed for the same reason - for their fur.

CRUELTIES OF THE MEAT INDUSTRY

The meat industry is cruel and wasteful and kills 10 billion animals in the U.S. every year. We have no need to consume the flesh of animals or drink their fluids, so these animals are bred, suffer, and are killed for nothing. Excess skin from slaughterhouses is far from harmless, because the meat industry is one of harm. The meat industry has created an artificial system of life and death. The animals killed are not incidental deaths. In order to look at the cruelties of the leather industry, you have to look at the cruelties of the meat and dairy industries, because they're inherently linked.

GLOBAL MARKET

When you wear a leather belt or leather jacket, you have no idea where that animal came from or how it was treated. Developing countries account for a higher percentage of leather production than developed countries. China, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh capture 60% of the world's leather production.

• **INDIA:** Much of the leather sold in the U.S. comes from overseas, especially in India, which is one of the leaders in the global leather industry. Many people mistakenly believe that cows are treated well because they are revered by some Indians, but it's not that cattle cannot be killed in India; it's that they can be killed in only certain provinces. The cattle are forced to travel hundreds of miles on foot, with their noses tied together, in the hot sun to the provinces where they can be legally killed.

There's something very disturbing about the animals marching these long distances on foot to their own slaughter. And that's how they travel - on foot.

PeTA's investigation revealed the following: "During the trip, cattle, buffaloes, and other animals killed for their skin travel on foot without food and water and with minimal time to rest. Their hooves are often bleeding and worn down to stumps, and they often collapse from exhaustion. In order to force them on, handlers deliberately break their tails and rub tobacco and chili peppers into their eyes." If one dies, he is skinned on the spot.

Once they arrive at the "transport trucks" that will take them the final distance to their slaughter, many are sick and injured from



graphic c/o www.peta.org

the grueling march. The law says that only twelve cattle can be put into one train car, but in reality, they shove 45-50 cattle inside these cars. The law says that only four cattle can be put in a truck. Over 75 are often thrown into one, their limbs and tails

broken to make more room. When they are unloaded, the cows who can still stand are pulled or forced to jump from the trucks; they frequently break their legs and pelvises in the process.

The cows' throats are slit in the slaughterhouse, and some have their legs cut off while they are still conscious. Others are skinned alive. The knives are rusty and the workers are callous and untrained. Butchers need possess no formal qualification or training. In mechanized slaughterhouses in Andhra Pradesh, boiling water is poured on the animal and its skin stripped while it is still alive and hanging upside down. In Kerala, the head is smashed in with a hammer - often up to 20 blows being given before the animal dies. Many of the butchers are children.

Millions of cattle that are jam-packed into these trains and trucks to go to West Bengal and Kerala to be slaughtered are only going for the leather industry, so again you have the case where these animals are suffering and dying only for their skin.

• **CHINA:** is the world's leading exporter of leather. In addition to the cattle, sheep, and other animals who are turned into leather in China, an estimated 2 million cats and dogs in China are killed for their skins each year. Confined to wire cages in which they can barely move, these animals are routinely skinned alive and hacked apart, piece by piece, until they bleed to death.

• **FRANCE:** more than 20,000 cats are stolen for the skin trade annually.

ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS

The environmental costs of keeping and killing animals are huge, ranging from the use of precious resources such as water and petroleum, destruction of wild lands to clear it for livestock grazing, deforestation, pollution of the waterways from waste run-off, the emission of methane (the number one greenhouse gas that contributes to global warming), the intentional killing of millions of wild animals to stop them from competing with cattle, the huge amounts of fossil fuels needed in livestock production, and so on and so on.

The tanning process is an incredibly energy-intensive and pollution-producing industry. In fact, tanneries are listed as top polluters on the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund list. Some of these hazardous chemicals are formaldehyde, coal tar derivatives, oils, dyes, and cyanide-based finishing compounds. Other chemicals include alcohol, coal tar, degreasing agents, formic acid, lead, lime, resin blenders, sodium chloride, sodium sulfate, sulfuric acid, waxes, and zinc. Most leather production involves chromium tanning, which is considered hazardous by the EPA.

People who have worked in and lived near tanneries are dying of cancer caused by exposure to toxic chemicals used to process and dye the leather.

The leather-manufacturing industry is categorized alongside the paper, steel, cement and petroleum manufacturing industries as a gross consumer of energy. This is aside from the energy used in just the keeping and killing of the animal.

ALTERNATIVES

Plastic wearables account for only a fraction of the petroleum used in the U.S., and though some plastics are better than others, and we can all still reduce our consumption of plastic in general, the manufacturing of synthetic shoes doesn't even come close to the toxic output by the leather industry. And of course, there's also organic cotton, linen, recycled rubber, ramie, canvas, and bamboo.

ONLINE RESOURCES:

- www.mooshoes.com
- www.alternativeoutfitters.com
- www.vegetarianshoesandbags.com

May your daily choices and purchasing decisions be a reflection of your deepest values.

