EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT LEATHER

Essential facts and figures to inform and educate about the many ways in which the fashion industry exploits animals for leather

Leather is often made from the skin of cows who have been used for their milk and flesh, with animal agriculture organisations referring to leather as a co-product. This means that by buying leather we are supporting dairy and cattle farming, industries that include leather revenues to add to the profits made from exploitation. Source: Meat and Livestock Australia

India is the second largest exporter of cow leather with only China producing more. The Indian leather industry has been accused of being linked to bonded labour of both adults and children. Source: CNN Freedom Project / Human Rights Watch

Today, leather is a booming industry. In the US, more than 139 million cows, calves, sheep, lambs, and pigs are killed for food each year, and skin accounts for roughly 50% of the total byproduct value of cattle. With the low profit margin for each head of cattle (about $3 a head), the meat industry incorporates skin sales to increase profitability. Source: Born Free USA

In 2014, an undercover expose by PETA revealed that in China dog skin - processed into ‘leather’ - was being exported under the pretense of being cow skin. Source: PETA (cw: graphic images) / The Guardian / The Daily Mail

A report by the Congressional Research Service shows that in 2014, the US imported $8.5 billion in leather articles from China. It is unknown how much of each year’s total might be dog or cat leather. Source: Titus.house.gov

Every year 1.4 billion animals including cows, water buffalos, sheep, goats, kangaroos and pigs are killed for leather. Source: Born Free USA

‘Exotic leather’ comes from animals such as alligators, armadillos, snakes and ostriches. They are mutilated, exploited and then bludgeoned, shot, or have their spinal cords severed using a mallet and chisel. Source: PETA

In countries such as the US and Australia, companies don’t have to state where the raw leather has come from, so even if we buy a leather product that says ‘made in Italy’, it could have originated in India or China and simply been finished in Italy. However, regardless of where the leather came from, an animal had to die for it. Source: PETA / Good On You

The conditions in tanneries, where humans work to produce and dye leather, are often terrible. In countries like Bangladesh and India, children can be found standing barefooted in highly toxic chemicals like arsenic and chromium. Studies have shown how all these chemicals lead to an increased risk of developing cancer, skin and respiratory diseases. Source: U.S. EPA

Further, millions of gallons of untreated water loaded with animal parts, dyes and chemicals are often pumped into open channels polluting the already polluted water streams that people depend on. Source: Our World (UN) / Water, Air & Soil Pollution

Studies have shown higher rates of cancer among tannery workers in places such as Italy, the US and Sweden, with the rates of cancer being as much as 50 per cent higher. Source: Indian Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine

Leather is not as biodegradable as many believe. Tanning is the method of converting raw animal skin to the stable, workable, long-lasting material called leather. This process is especially designed to prevent leather from biodegrading by stabilising collagen or protein fibers. (Historians have found preserved specimens of leather dating to 5000 B.C.) Source: Born Free USA

Leather is the least sustainable material used by the fashion industry to create clothes and accessories, according to a landmark ‘cradle-to-gate’ analysis of its environmental impacts conducted in 2017. Source: Pulse of the Fashion Industry

Synthetic leather has half the environmental impact of animal skin leather, with other pioneering alternatives such as apple leather, cactus leather and pineapple leather reportedly even more sustainable. Source: Pulse of the Fashion Industry

A last word from Surge: It’s commonly believed that wearing leather is sustainable and ethical because we’re often already killing the animals, so we might as well use their skin as well to create a ‘natural’ and biodegradable material. However, not only are some cows and other animals killed exclusively for their skin, but due to the carcinogenic chemicals and the processing required to turn skin into leather, it would still be more sustainable to just let the skin biodegrade, and doing so would also reduce water pollution and remove the serious human health and rights implications that occur during the tanning process.