

Shear Destruction: Wool, Fashion and the Biodiversity Crisis

A report by the Center for Biological Diversity and Collective Fashion Justice's CIRCUMFAUNA Initiative (November 2021)

Animal agriculture is a leading driver of the climate crisis, deforestation, land degradation and pollution. While the environmental impacts of the meat industry have gained significant attention, the role of farmed animals used in the fashion industry is often omitted from the conversation or, worse, greenwashed. Wool in particular is often marketed as "sustainable," but as this report will show, wool is not a fiber simply provided by nature – it's a scaled product of modern industrial, chemical, ecological and genetic intervention that's a key contributor to devastating biodiversity loss.

From habitat degradation caused by grazing sheep to the chemicals used in scouring, the entire process of rearing sheep and turning shorn wool into usable fiber is riddled with threats to wildlife. Compared to the production of other materials used in similar types of knitwear, thermal layers and suits, the climate cost of sheep's wool is 3 times greater than acrylic and more than 5 times greater than conventionally grown cotton, according to the Higg Index scoring system. An analysis by Collective Fashion Justice of production systems in Australia found that wool uses 367 times more land per bale than cotton.

But a better path forward exists, with exciting innovations in alternative materials that are not derived from fossil fuels. As the fashion industry becomes increasingly invested in reducing its impact on the climate and biodiversity, it must confront the impacts of wool on wildlife and the environment and commit to a just transition to truly sustainable materials.

The fashion industry should do the following:

1. Fashion industry associations, initiatives and certifiers should update their sustainability language to acknowledge the harms to biodiversity caused by wool.
2. Clothing and textile brands should publicly commit to phasing out or reducing wool by at least 50% by 2025.
3. Large clothing and textile brands should invest in the research and development of wool alternative material innovation.
4. Fashion designers should commit to phasing out or reducing wool by at least 50% by 2025 and supporting material innovation by using alternative materials in their clothing lines by 2023.
5. In phasing out wool, the industry should embrace alternatives that do not depend on fossil fuel-derived fibers (such as acrylic, polyester and nylon) because these come associated with their own harmful climate and environmental consequences.

The fashion industry can no longer sit on the sidelines of the climate and extinction crises. It must take responsibility for its environmental impacts and take action to create a world where people, wildlife and beauty can all thrive.