



by Michelle Preston

# Hell for leather

Giving up meat turns down the heat, but the industry's got another trick up its sleeve, down its shoe and in its handbag

To wear leather or not to wear leather? That is the question. Some people say that because vegetarians simply do not eat meat and fish, it is ok to wear leather because it is only a by-product of the meat industry. However, it is not as simple as that!

Even though leather is classed as a by-product it is still an important aspect of the meat trade: the skin/hide is worth about 10 per cent of the animal's total value (1) and the leather industry earns £593 million a year in the UK (2).

Leather comes from farmed animals - mainly cattle - none of which reach the natural end of their lifespan and instead suffer on farms before meeting a violent, frightening death in a slaughterhouse. Despite the seemingly idyllic scenes of cows in fields, they only represent a small part of the life of beef and dairy cows - both of whom are used for leather. Beef cows are bred simply to eat, get big and die. They are almost universally kept in housing in winter and there is also an increasing trend towards 'year round housing' - intensive farming for cows. During the first week of their lives they are usually castrated and have their horn buds chemically burnt out. They are fed drugs and a controlled diet to help gain weight quickly. Selective breeding has also led to specialised cows whose health suffers from painful diseases brought on by their unnatural size and environment.

Dairy cattle are among the most exploited animals on the planet. Like every other mammal, cows only produce milk when they have offspring, so to increase productivity a dairy cow's life is a constant cycle of pregnancy and lactation. On top of this physical strain is the psychological stress when the calves are separated from the mothers. After being allowed to suckle her colostrum - the first milk produced by the mother after birth which provides vital immunity to the calf - the calves are taken away within days in order to maximise the amount of milk available for humans. A 'productive' dairy cow will supply up to 12,000 litres of milk a year (between 25 and 40 litres a day) - an unnatural amount and 10 times more than her calf could require. Such excessive quantities place a huge burden on her, resulting in protruding pelvic and rib bones and massively distended udders. The energy dairy cows lose is so great, that most only manage three lactations before being killed (3).

Leather production also has its own cruelty issues. For example soft leather does not come from old cows but from calves, and the softest leather of all comes from unborn calves whose mothers have been slaughtered. Despite supposedly humane stunning in abattoirs, millions of animals are still conscious when their throats are cut, and can be skinned alive.

## All things sacred

One of the biggest leather producers in the world is India and nearly 65 per cent of its leather and leather goods are exported to the EU - within which the UK is an important market (4). Many people in India are Hindu and consider cows as sacred. However, investigations have revealed that much cruelty remains; including cows being goaded on to extremely crowded trucks, or made to walk between trucking points - beaten and forced to move forward by having chilli seeds rubbed into their eyes and their tails broken (5).

## Wear and tear

As well as sharing the environmental destruction of the meat

industry, leather production is itself a major source of pollution. The preservation and manufacturing processes of the hides produce solid waste, such as dust, hair, trimmings and shavings, and also large volumes of effluent contaminated with toxic compounds such as aluminium, chromium sulphide and caustic soda. Tanneries are often sited near rivers as tanning requires a constant supply of water (each tonne of hide needs 50 cubic metres of water), which will contain various polluting substances at the end of the process. This solid and liquid waste is usually discharged into the rivers and can cause severe water pollution or even blockage and stagnation of water courses (6). The high oxygen demand created by the waste breaking down also disturbs the ecological balance of the area. Oxygen is stripped from the water causing plants, bacteria, fish and even the river or stream itself to die, leading to the growth of toxic water conditions (7). The leather products themselves, once worn and discarded, decompose slowly because of the preservation treatment during manufacture - leading to a greater quantity of refuse.

People who work in and live near tanneries suffer too. Many are dying from cancer caused by exposure to the toxic chemicals used (8).

## Foul fashions

Are you sitting comfortably? On a leather cushion? Wearing leather shoes? Clutching a leather bag with your leather gloves? From an early age we are told that leather equals luxury, and it pervades our society from designer fashions to our everyday wares. But buying animal skin means you are directly supporting the meat industry and the suffering it entails, on the people, the planet and the animals. As well as cows, leather also comes from pigs, goats, sheep and deer - but that is not all...

Ponies, zebras, dolphins, turtles, alligators, crocodile, toads, ostriches, kangaroos, lizards, snakes, salmon, seals... the list goes on. It seems that whatever the creature, if it has got a skin there is a human somewhere that wants to wear it. Even dog leather is sold worldwide labelled as cow skin, and in Thailand more than 500 dogs are violently slaughtered every week. What is mistakenly considered to be the extravagant end of the leather market is certainly not glamorous for the animals involved. Alligators and crocodiles are clubbed to death; in 2004 the Canadian government authorised the brutal massacre of over 300,000 seals for their skins (9); ostriches are farmed in the UK; and snakes such as the boa constrictor and cobra are skinned alive (10). Wild species killed for their coats have very little protection and may also be endangered - try wearing that on your conscience as well as your feet!

## Kangaroos

Australia exports approximately 3 million kangaroo skins, worth more than £12 million, to Europe and the USA every year. The vast majority of these skins are used to make football boots. Products are often labelled 'K leather' or 'RKT' (rubberised kangaroo technology) to disguise the fact that they are made from the skins of butchered kangaroos. Each year, the Australian government sets a quota for the number of kangaroos the industry can kill; for 2004 it was 4.4 million.

Kangaroos are shot at night in the vast outback and hunters are supposed to adhere to a Code of Practice, a guideline which is neither legally-enforceable nor linked to the Australian Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. According to the Code, to kill kangaroos 'humanely' hunters should shoot them once in the head, but frequently the animals may be shot in the throat, the neck, or have their jaws blown off. An investigation by Viva! revealed that official numbers for the kill do not include the baby kangaroos who also die as the worthless 'waste' of the industry. Tiny joeys are pulled from their dead mothers' pouches and stamped on, clubbed or simply left to die. Older joeys hop away into the night invariably to die of starvation, predation, cold or neglect (11). Six species of kangaroo are already extinct, with four more species extinct on the Australian mainland and 17 species listed as endangered or vulnerable (12).

Thanks to the wonders of technology and design there are now high-quality, practical, animal-free materials available for everyone. Vegetan Uppers, for example, (used by companies such as Vegetarian Shoes) are great for every day wear, being breathable, water-resistant, 70-80% biodegradable and easy to clean. Or those who need something tougher can get Vegetan Micro - hard-wearing, water-resistant, breathable, exceptionally like high-quality leather in performance and has a distinctive grain. There is even Stretch Fake Suede for the dapper among you, which is elasticated, breathable and soft to the touch! (13)

## Animal-free Stockists

### Viva! & the VVF (mailorder only)

8 York Court, Wilder Street, Bristol BS2 8QH  
Tel: 0117 944 1000 / 0117 970 5190

W: [www.viva.org.uk](http://www.viva.org.uk) E: [info@viva.org.uk](mailto:info@viva.org.uk)

W: [www.vegetarian.org.uk](http://www.vegetarian.org.uk) E: [info@vegetarian.org.uk](mailto:info@vegetarian.org.uk)

Viva!, the animal rights organisation campaigning for vegetarianism, sell a wide range of merchandise in their *Gifts for Life* catalogue, including leather-free belts. The VVF has a *Vegetarian Shop* catalogue. Contact them for a free copy or shop online.

### Vegetarian Shoes

12 Gardner Street, Brighton, BN1 1UP  
Tel: 01273 691913

W: [www.vegetarian-shoes.co.uk](http://www.vegetarian-shoes.co.uk)

E: [information@vegetarian-shoes.co.uk](mailto:information@vegetarian-shoes.co.uk)

Send name and address for free mailorder colour brochure; or buy online or visit their shop in Brighton (open 10am-6pm Mon-Sat). Their wide, high-quality range includes men's and ladies' shoes and boots, leisure shoes, walking boots, safety boots, jackets, belts etc...

### Freerangers (mailorder only)

87 Derwent Street, Chopwell, Tyne & Wear  
NE17 7HZ

Tel: 01207 565 957

W: [www.freerangers.co.uk](http://www.freerangers.co.uk) E: [info@freerangers.co.uk](mailto:info@freerangers.co.uk)

Small mailorder catalogue with old fashioned, comfortable shoes and sandals - all cruelty-free made with a breathable, durable synthetic material called Lorica.

### Ethical Wares (mailorder and selected stockists)

Caegwyn, Temple Bar, Felinfach, Ceredigion  
SA48 7SA Wales  
Tel: 01570 471155

W: [www.ethicalwares.com](http://www.ethicalwares.com) E: [vegans@ethicalwares.com](mailto:vegans@ethicalwares.com)

A range of footwear, clothes and accessories suitable for vegans, vegetarians and all those who care about the environment.

### Beyond Skin (mailorder only)

PO Box 45551, London NW1 9TW  
Tel: 0207 482 1002

W: [www.beyondskin.co.uk](http://www.beyondskin.co.uk) E: [info@beyondskin.co.uk](mailto:info@beyondskin.co.uk)

Sell a variety of fashionable and stylish, high-quality ladies shoes, stilettos and boots.

### Veganline (mailorder only)

Freepost Lon 10506, London SW14 1YY  
Tel: 0800 458 4442

W: [www.veganline.com](http://www.veganline.com)

Call or log on to the website for a catalogue of animal-free shoes, trainers, hiking boots clothes and belts.

### No Bull Footwear (mailorder only)

15 Chichester Drive East, Saltdean, Brighton BN2 8LD  
Tel/Fax: 01273 302979

W: [www.veganstore.co.uk](http://www.veganstore.co.uk)

Sells a variety of dress and casual shoes, hiking boots, jackets, belts and wallets among Veganstore's usual array of animal-free treats.

**The following companies make all-synthetic shoes to order but do not stock vegan products exclusively:**

### Green Shoes

69 High Street, Totnes, S. Devon TQ9 5PB  
Tel: 01803 864997

W: [www.greenshoes.co.uk](http://www.greenshoes.co.uk) E: [info@greenshoes.co.uk](mailto:info@greenshoes.co.uk)

Handmade non-leather footwear to order for adults and children. Send SAE for catalogue.

### Lyme Leisure

South Street, Axminster, Devon EX13 5AD  
Tel: 01297 631133

E: [axevegans@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:axevegans@yahoo.co.uk)

Vegan shoe repairs and shoes. Ranges of ladies, gents and children's footwear and boots, and camping equipment - other vegan products made to order.

## Ride on hide?

Car upholstery is another lucrative interest of the leather industry. It takes the skins of approximately four cows to produce the interior of just one car (14). However, many consumers are demanding ethical vehicles and popular manufacturers are responding with non-leather furnishings or synthetic alternatives available for some models. So there is no need to compromise on va-va-voom if you are a va-va-veggie!

## Faking it

Whereas some decide to say no to leather gradually, other people cut animal products out of their lives instantly (what better excuse to hit the shops?!), and it has never been easier. Just remember to always check the label; if this symbol  is on it then the product is real animal skin.

There are cruelty-free products on the high-street, as well as a growing number of vegan retailers and manufacturers, so there is no need to miss out on fashion. In fact, the synthetic versions are often reasonably-priced rip-offs of more exclusive designer styles - from comfy loafers and chunky belts to cool jackets and sexy stilettos! Below are several companies who produce fantastic fakes - so get shopping!

**There are also several companies/high-street stores that include a good selection of non-leather shoes or other synthetic products in their stock, such as:**

Accessorize	Osiris (skateboard shoes)
Birkenstock (sandals & clogs)	Olivers
BHS	Peacocks
Capezio (dance shoes)	Pennangalen (goth, rock, fetish & biker boots)
Circa (skateboard shoes)	
Debenhams	Primark
Dexters (bowling shoes)	Ravel
Dolcis	Shoe Express
Faith	Shoe Fayre
Frontier	Shoe Zone
Giali UK (motorcycle apparel)	Shuh
MK1	Sketchers (trainers)
Marks & Spencer	Spalding UK (synthetic leather volleyballs, basketballs & footballs)
New Balance	Stead & Simpson
New Look	The Office
Nine West	Wilson Sporting Goods
Northwave (snowboarding boots)	Company
Offspring	Woolworths

## References

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- <http://www.cowsarecool.com/indianLeather.asp>
- FAO, Committee On Commodity Problems: Trade In Hides and Skins and Environment. November 9-11 1998: <http://www.fao.org/unfao/bodies/ccp/hs/98/w9790e.htm>
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- <http://www.cowsarecool.com/environment.asp>
- Canada embarks on mass seal hunt. BBC News Online, April 13 2004
- Gellatley, J. (2000) Born to be Wild, page 18
- Gellatley, J. (2004) Under Fire, Viva!
- <http://www.savethekangaroo.com/background/index.shtml>
- For a complete list of vegan materials go to <http://www.vegetarian-shoes.co.uk/material.asp>
- <http://www.peta.org.uk/alerts/automation/AlertItem.asp?id=972>

## VVF - Feeding you the Facts

This is one in a series of VVF factsheets. For details contact:

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