

Animal Musks: The Dark Secret of Perfume

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I call my perfumes “natural botanical perfume,” and people often ask me why I choose to add the word “botanical” to “natural.” Isn’t that what “natural” means, people ask, perfume made with plant essences rather than synthetic chemicals? I am always filled with a bittersweet feeling when I have this conversation with someone, as I know I am about to introduce them to the dark secret of perfume.

When I first began to study natural perfumery, I was very surprised to learn how extensively animal musks are used in making perfume. The facts that I learned as I began to investigate further into the musk industry were deeply disturbing, and not at all in line with my love of animals and my desire to make perfumes that reflect my awe and respect for the earth and its resources. And it’s not only commercial or “mainstream” perfumers who use musks—because animal musks are technically a naturally derived product, many perfumers still call their perfumes “natural” even though they include ingredients that have been harvested from animals at the cost of terrible suffering.

The main sources of animal musk are the secretions of civet cats, beavers, and musk deer. Perfumers also use a natural animal product called ambergris derived from sperm whales and pygmy sperm whales that we will discuss here, as well.

Civet cats, who are rarely bred in captivity, are captured in the wild and held in tiny cages barely larger than their bodies, where they are kept without release in hot, smoke-filled sheds for up to 15 years.[1] Every 10 days or so the musk is brutally extracted from the glands of the conscious civets. Many of the civets cease to eat after the first extraction is performed.[2]

In 2000, wildlife proponents were closely watching European beaver populations, which were threatened due to overhunting and other risks.[3] Throughout history, beavers have been sought for their scent-containing castoreum sacs for use in the perfume industry. Musk deer are also killed for their scent-containing pods, to the point that many populations are nearing extinction. Although only the male musk deer secretes musk, both male and female deer are killed indiscriminately in the hunt for musk. Three to five deer are killed for every one scent-pod collected.[4] The European organization TRAFFIC, which monitors worldwide traffic in animals and animal products, has stated that in Europe alone, the amount of raw musk legally imported over the past two decades represents the loss of tens of thousands of wild musk deer.[5]

Ambergris has a more complex and mysterious history, as so much happens in the ocean that we never see. It was once thought that sperm whales and pygmy whales vomited up this mass of indigestible squid remains and that it is “cured in the sea” for a decade before it washes up on the beach. The reality of this can be grim: In the most tragic of cases, the mass grows too large for the whale to vomit or excrete and eventually, the whale’s gut ruptures.[6] The whale dies, and the mass is released into the ocean. It has also been reported that ambergris was retrieved by much more brutal means—in years past, wildlife activists estimated that most ambergris sold was from slaughtered whales.

Debunking the Myths

The use of animal musk in perfume is surrounded by a mystique that draws people to musk and blurs the truth about where these products actually come from. Animal musk has had an alluring place in the history of perfume, and conjures up ties to sex, to potency, to royalty, to mystery. But there is nothing sexy about this simple truth: In order for a perfume to contain animal musk, an animal must either be tortured or killed, or often both.[7] For me, when confronted with this truth, there is no choice. No scent, no fixative power, no mystical background is worth cruelty, suffering, and the endangerment of entire species.

The first place I turned when I wanted to learn more about animal musk and where it comes from was my worn copy of Steffen Arctander’s 1961 *Perfume and Flavor Materials of Natural Origin*, the ultimate source book for many natural perfumers. Arctander writes about the frequent “teasing” captive civets endure, the narrow, cramped cages they are kept in, and the regular and painful “scrapings” of its anal glands. Arctander estimates that some civets experience 400 to 800 scrapings of their anal glands in their lifetimes. When I read this now I understand somewhat how easy it has been for natural perfumers to bury their heads in the sand about this issue. The process sounds uncomfortable, true, but “teasing” the civets sounds quite mild, almost friendly. In truth, the more stressed a civet cat is, the more musk it secretes, so civet farmers do their best when the animals are in a constant and heightened state of stress.

Natural perfumery exists in this constant double-relationship to animal musks and the processes that produce them. We want to be in harmony with nature, distilling the earth’s beauty into these precious perfumes. But the actual origins of animal musks are horrific and brutal, so we have to hide those aspects lest they ruin the lovely “natural” story we tell ourselves and our consumers. I met once with a representative from a major French supplier of perfume materials. He gave me his company’s brochure, which had lovely photos of fields of flowers and pretty descriptions of all the natural essences they offered. I asked him if his company sold civet musk or castoreum. “Yes, we do” he replied. “We just don’t list them on our website or in our catalog.”

Pushing for Humane Treatment of Animals

Along with the growing resurgence of interest in natural perfume, interest in and use of animal musks seems to be growing as well. I am hopeful, though, in light of another growing trend—that of care and consideration for the humane treatment of our food animals. Voter propositions to outlaw battery cages for chickens and other inhumane treatment of livestock, the awareness being raised by Eric Schlosser, Michael Pollan and other writers and filmmakers about the living conditions of farm animals, and a growing societal focus on the importance of humanely-raised dairy, meat, and eggs all give me hope that people will see the importance of applying these ethical and empathetic considerations to the materials in our perfumes. Unfortunately, oversight and regulation at this time appears to be impossible; my research and experience have shown that the perfume industry is very secretive about which companies use animal musk in their formulations. Our only recourse is to research the products we use, and cease using perfumes that contain animal musks.

Here is where I wrestle with a cycle of personal conflict, followed by renewed determination. I never want to dictate anyone's actions. And I know that the use of animal musk is a centuries-old practice deeply ingrained in perfume lore and creation. This issue has social, political and economic implications that extend far beyond the doors of my natural perfumery. Further, I know that there are many ways to look at this issue that I haven't examined closely here. For example, researchers have been asking for years if using animal musk is a sustainable practice. (A 2000 report by the World Conservation Union suggests that "Sustainability can only be defined in a system where both the ecosystem and the human subsystem co-exist.")^[8] The sustainability of the practice of using animal musk in perfumes could be an article in itself.

In this article, I am taking a step in the name of education, fueled by my passion and respect for nature and animals. I feel it is important that people know the real story behind the ingredients in the perfumes they wear so that each person has the opportunity to make a truly informed decision based on their feelings about the beauty of a scent and the more far-reaching global implications. If learning this information has opened your eyes, you are probably wondering what to do next!

What Perfumers Can Do

Experiment with new base notes and fixatives—there are so many great perfumes waiting to be created, free from animal musks. I have successfully made long-lasting, deep, luscious perfumes without any animal products in them. The time I spend experimenting with the magical alchemy of botanical materials is some of the most wonderful of my life, and I encourage you to do the same! Arctander's book (civet-teasing paragraphs aside) is a great resource to guide you through all the botanical options out there.

Contact your suppliers. I've made the choice not to buy from companies that sell animal musks—and you would be surprised how many of them do. Let your spending power show you won't support animal cruelty in the interest of perfume. You can contact me to talk about this more.

Spread the word to other natural perfumers—many people just don't know this dark secret about the origins of animal musks. And, spread the word to your consumers – let them know what makes your botanical perfumes special and different from those containing animal ingredients.

What Consumers Can Do

Ask your favorite natural perfumers whether their perfumes contain animal musks – and don't just ask about the perfume you're considering buying, ask whether they purchase animal musks at all. Let perfumers know you aren't interested in smelling good at the price of animal suffering.

Be aware that commercial, synthetic perfumes can also contain animal musks. Many high-end perfume companies have a long history of using animal musk in their formulas. [9] And keep in mind that some synthetic musks, found in many commercial perfumes, have been shown to have extremely hazardous effects on our health and on the environment.[10] Shop botanical! There are enough amazing plant essences in this world to create an infinite number of gorgeous scents.

We are at a point in our perfume development where we have more access to beautiful, incredible essences than ever before. In these modern times, with so much bounty to work with, there is simply no need and no justification for including these archaic practices of animal torture and species endangerment.

But What About Ambergris?

While previous reports indicated that ambergris was on the market as a result of whale slaughter, current research reveals this internal substance may cause the whale's natural demise. We find ourselves asking these questions: Did the whale excrete the mass of indigestible material and carry on? Or did the mass fester and cause an eruption in the whale's gut that killed it, and only then did it find its way to the shore to be used in natural perfumery? Consumers must look inward and decide for themselves if they want a product that may have landed in their hands as a result of trauma.

While I realize these questions can be difficult to ask, I am grateful to live in a world where this information is available for us to make informed choices.

Freedom of Expression... for Animals

The ideas I share here are based on a very strong belief that animals should be able to live in peace without threats to their existence. They should be able to live, roam, run—

whatever it is they are put on this earth to do. Their lives should not be at the mercy of human whims and interests. While I oppose the use of musk from any animal who has been tortured or killed, I want to focus on civet cats for a moment and explore some ideas for phasing out the practice of trapping them and scraping their glands for musk. Let's start the conversation! Consider this: researchers from Addis Adaba University in Ethiopia have found civet "scent markings" in the wild on trees, shrubs, fencing poles and more.[11] They have successfully collected these secretions, suggesting there may be a more humane, less intrusive way to use civet musk in the future.

These researchers suggest that local people could be trained to collect civet secretions and that this could be a good source of foreign exchange for Ethiopia. Imagine! Using this sustainable method, civet cats could live freely and people could develop a source of income. Taking this concept a step further, I know there are organizations that provide microloans to women to help them build better lives for themselves and their families. Why not distribute microloans to women to help them gain the training they need to collect civet secretions in this new, non-intrusive way? It's an idea that benefits animals and humans! In a case like this, if the method to collect civet secretions was sustainable and certified as harmless to animals, I might consider civet musk as a novelty.

Another solution could be to establish a civet retirement sanctuary for animals that have been kept in captivity. Here, civets could roam free and leave their marks on trees as they would in the wild. If people decided to collect the secretions, they would need to do so in a manner that would not disturb the civets living there.

Conclusion

The dark secret of perfumery is painful to hear, but learning the facts is a first step to making informed decisions about the products we use on our bodies. There are many ways to create amazing and innovative perfumes without the use of animal products – natural perfumers prove this every day. We make our choices: Perfume companies large and small can take steps to creating cruelty-free products; and consumers can avoid products made with animal musks. But we can only take these steps and make these choices after we know the full story and consider sustainable and non-intrusive solutions that do not maim or kill wild animals to satisfy our whims. For me, this also includes animal testing, a practice that many perfume and cosmetic companies employ to ensure safety. But that's another story for another time...

Start the discussion in your community, and with your friends and family. Progress doesn't happen in silence, and it doesn't happen overnight. The perfumers of the past were people of their own time—they may not have considered humane treatment of animals to be a priority, and they may not have been aware of the alternatives that existed. Today, we consider the fate of animals very carefully. I believe we are moving in the right direction. Let's keep moving toward a more sustainable, cruelty-free world!

For more information, please contact me at laurie@purrfumery.com

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About Velvet & Sweet Pea’s Purrfumery and Laurie Stern

The botanical perfumer behind Velvet & Sweet Pea’s Purrfumery, Laurie Stern creates wondrous perfumes, colognes, body oils, bath salts and body frostings using natural floral, wood, seed, spice and citrus essences. Her business is certified by “Leaping Bunny,” a coalition of eight animal protection groups, who ensure that none of her ingredients or her supplier’s ingredients are tested on animals. Stern collects many ingredients for her perfumes from her own Perfumer’s Garden, and even uses beeswax from her own bees. She blends each of her beautiful scents with organic grape alcohol and jojoba bases, and refuses to use synthetics or harsh chemicals such as phthalates. Her perfumes are 100 percent cruelty-free and do not contain even a trace of animal musk or animal fixatives. To learn more, visit www.purrfumery.com.

Laurie is also a member of the International Perfume Foundation (IPF) and embraces the organization’s desire to build a community of professionals who value the transparency and authenticity of the perfume supply channel. As the Director of Animal Conservation for the IPF, she seeks to educate perfume and animal lovers about the use of animal musks in perfume, and urge the industry to use sustainable, cruelty-free methods to produce their products.