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THE FUR SUSTAINABILITY DEBATE: IS REAL OR FAUX BETTER FOR THE PLANET?

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With more and more designers ditching the real stuff, it's the question on everyone's mind.

Welcome to [Sustainability Week](#)! While Fashionista covers sustainability news and eco-friendly brands all year round, we wanted to use this time around Earth Day and the anniversary of the [Rana Plaza](#) collapse as a reminder to focus on the impact that the fashion industry has on people and the planet.

Back in the early '90s, the fashion industry's backlash against fur played out on billboards and in magazine ads, with supermodels stripping down and proclaiming that they'd "rather go naked" than wear it. Animal rights were [the era's cause célèbre](#), led by the controversial activists at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, who ambushed the halls of *Vogue* and [Calvin Klein](#), shackled themselves to racks of sable coats at [Saks Fifth Avenue](#) and turned legions of celebrities into radicals — at least for a time.

More than two decades later, the fur industry (bruised, but not beaten by the campaigns against it) is back in the spotlight, as week after week it seems like another luxury brand [announces that it is going fur-free](#). In the past six months alone, [Gucci](#), [Versace](#), [Michael Kors](#), [Jimmy Choo](#), Furla, [John Galiano](#) and [Donna Karan](#) have added their names to the list. [Tom Ford](#) and Givenchy's [Clare Waight Keller](#) have pivoted away from exotic skins in favor of shearling, cowhide and fluffy faux furs. Yoox Net-A-Porter Group [stopped selling fur](#) last year, citing customer feedback, and for the May issue of *InStyle*, editor in chief Laura Brown [penned a letter](#) about her decision not to photograph fur for the magazine, a policy that's been in place since she arrived in 2016.

The shift is also occurring on the legislative front, with [San Francisco](#) recently becoming the largest U.S. city to ban fur sales (the law goes into effect in January 2019, though retailers will have a year to sell off their inventory), and [Norway outlining a plan](#) to shut down its remaining fox and mink farms by 2025.

This time, though, it isn't angry protestors at the head of the movement — CEOs and creative directors are signing on of their own accord. And the industry's conversations around fur have taken a distinctly 2018 turn, focusing not just on animal rights but also on environmental sustainability and whether wearing animals farmed for their fur still jibes with the lifestyle of today's hyper-attuned customer.

On the first front, at least, fur industry lobbyists seem happy to engage, arguing that faux is actually the less sustainable choice because it's generally made from acrylic, a synthetic material made from a non-renewable resource that can take [hundreds of years to biodegrade](#) in a landfill (animal fur, by contrast, biodegrades in just a few years). "Petroleum-based faux fur products are the complete antithesis of the concept of responsible environmental conservation," says Keith Kaplan, director of communications at the Fur Information Council of America. "Right off the top, petrol-based plastic fur is extremely harmful to the environment. It isn't biodegradable. It's harmful to wildlife."

There is also a [growing body of research](#) on the environmental impact of microfibers, the tiny plastic particles that synthetic fabrics shed in the wash. Whatever isn't filtered out by wastewater treatment plants can end up in waterways and in the food supply, ingested by aquatic animals. A [2016 study](#) published in *Environmental Science & Technology* found that synthetic jackets released an average of 1,174 milligrams of microfibers when washed. Per the study's findings, front-loading washing machines and higher-quality textiles mitigate the damage; [Patagonia](#) also sells [a laundry bag](#) that helps trap fibers in the wash.

Finally, Kaplan contends that trapping wild animals like fox, beavers and coyotes, which constitutes about 15 percent of the trade, helps manage wildlife populations and provides a continued livelihood for many indigenous communities. "The fur trade provides a crucial, finely-tuned symbiotic relationship that helps to achieve the objectives of wildlife management and conservation and society as a whole," says Kaplan.

Anti-fur advocates agree that synthetics are a less-than-ideal substitute, but they point to environmental hazards in the fur manufacturing process — the [CO2 emissions](#) associated with keeping and feeding tens of thousands of mink on a single farm, [manure runoff](#) into nearby lakes and rivers, the formaldehyde, nonylphenol ethoxylates and other [toxic chemicals](#) used in fur dressing and dyeing — as evidence that the alternative is even worse. Plus, they say, the traps used to hunt wild animals have a history of ensnaring "[nontarget](#)" animals like domestic dogs, cats, birds and small mammals.

Both sides come armed with ample evidence backing up their claims, along with [arguments](#) for why the other's is flawed or biased. For even the most informed shopper, it's a lot to digest.

One thing we can do, however, is separate issues of sustainability from issues of ethics and animal welfare. If you're morally opposed to wearing fur or supporting brands that use it, the answer is fairly straightforward: avoid it. If, however, you don't feel particularly strongly about that side of the argument but want to make the best choices you can for the environment, there are other considerations to take into account, like the quality of a garment and how long you'll wear it.

Plus, says P.J. Smith, senior manager of fashion policy at the Humane Society of the United States, there aren't nearly as many compromises to make now that there are so many alternative options out there. "Gucci, when they went fur-free, they talked about how creativity can jump to many different directions," he says. "That could include faux fur, but I think they're trying to find other ways of creating a look and a feel that isn't necessarily just putting faux fur on it. I always like to think that innovation is what luxury is becoming — it's about being socially responsible and being innovative."

From his perspective, this is where the fur industry's case falls apart: "When a company goes fur-free, they're just getting rid of a product. It doesn't mean they're switching to another product." Some brands are using more shearling and cowhide — which, as byproducts (or at least co-products) of the food industry, don't fall into the same category as animals like mink, fox and raccoon dog, which are killed solely for their pelts, according to the [Fur Free Alliance](#). Others are making faux-fur coats that are designed to last as long as your great-grandmother's mink, addressing one of the chief concerns about the material's environmental impact — its perceived disposability — from the outset.

Designer Kym Canter launched the ethical faux fur brand [House of Fluff](#) in November 2017, funding the line with proceeds raised from selling the 26 fur coats she accumulated over her years as the creative director at J. Mendel. Now, in place of exotic pieces made from monkey and ocelot, she makes shaggy cropped jackets and plush bombers out of cruelty free materials, and makes an effort to keep sustainability in mind at each step, choosing recycled polyester, making the collection in New York City to reduce its carbon footprint, and sourcing fabrics from Europe, where regulations around pollution are stricter than in China.

"We're making garments that are forever," says Canter. "They're not like what you get from Zara or someplace like that, where you're going to wear it for a season and then throw it out and it's going to end in a landfill. We're really making something that's going to have the lifespan of what real fur has."

She's not the only one that's trying to elevate faux: Gilles Mendel's daughter Chloé recently launched her brand [Maison Atia](#), making luxe outerwear using the same techniques and machines used in traditional fur production. London-based [Shrimps](#) has built a loyal fanbase around its candy-colored coats made from faux fur, vegan leather, and textural materials like coated denim, while Aussie label [Unreal Fur](#) designs stand-out jackets and stoles made to last longer than fast fashion at a still-accessible price point.

Canter's change of heart illustrates what many brands are really thinking of when they make the decision to go fur-free: their customers' approval. "You're seeing consumers care more about social concerns and reward companies for being socially responsible," says Smith. "I think brands recognize that, and you can see it on social media as well. When Gucci went fur-free, I think it was one of their most liked posts of all time."

He's been working with the Humane Society for nine years, and says conversations have taken on an entirely new tone even in the last three years, with brands approaching him rather than the reverse. He's started going into meetings with a new attitude, from, "You shouldn't do this, or you shouldn't do that," to being, "You know this is going to happen. This is happening. So you have an option at this point to either be a leader or fall behind other companies that are going to be rewarded for being socially-responsible and being leaders when it comes to animal welfare."

Kaplan at FICA disagrees that it's a done deal, pointing to millennials' affinity for fur trim (the industry's [fastest-growing category](#)) on parkas, sneakers, handbags and more, along with furry accessories like bag charms and striped scarves. Indeed, the global industry is still valued at more than \$40 billion (a number that dwarfs the market for faux fur), and one need only walk around New York City in the winter to see that Canada Goose, Moncler, and other fur-friendly labels are as popular as ever.

Many designers also take the stance that genuine fur is the more sustainable option. London-based footwear label [Mou](#) avoids faux fur as a "non-biodegradable pollutant," says founder Shelley Tichborne, but also because the fabric doesn't "breathe" in the same way natural materials do, leading to unpleasant smells that are impossible to eradicate, shortening the product's lifespan. "In contrast, the natural fibre materials we use such as calfskin, goatskin, sheepskin, antelope, lambskin and rabbit fur are by-products of the meat and dairy industries — all the animals are eaten for their meat, and some produce milk for human consumption," she says. "The skins from these animals are naturally beautiful, soft to the touch, warm, biodegradable and durable, lasting — with care — for up to thirty years."

[Brother Vellies'](#) Aurora James, an outspoken advocate for sustainable fashion, has [likewise said](#) she chooses animal by-product furs over synthetics because of the environmental impact of the latter, although she acknowledges that the trade-off is that they aren't cruelty-free. Unlike many brands (including ones that have publicly ditched fur), her leathers are also relatively eco-friendly: she uses Kudu skins produced from government-regulated culling, locally-sourced rabbit and springbok in Kenya and South Africa, and vegetable dyes.

Leather, Smith acknowledges, is another hurdle entirely. Apart from animal welfare issues, leather tanneries use toxic chemicals that pose [severe health risks](#) to workers and surrounding communities, usually in regions like [Bangladesh](#), India, and China where government protections are scarce, and end up in local waterways. Other than Stella McCartney, whose label has been famously fur- and leather-free since it launched in 2001, no major fashion house has committed to avoiding animal skins entirely. Leather also tends to be less controversial because cow hides and sheepskins are co-products of the food industry (McCartney, of course, is a staunch vegetarian).

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In this area of the industry, at least, we're seeing a third lane emerge: biofabricated leathers, which are grown in a lab using animal-free collagen. At the forefront of this technology is a startup called [Modern Meadow](#), which is developing bioleather that looks and feels like animal skins, without compromising the environment or animal welfare.

Creative Director Suzanne Lee says that they've seen significant interest from companies across various industries, including fashion and footwear. "Brands are seeking new raw material and manufacturing solutions from their supply chains, while design teams are always pushing for innovation that broadens their creative toolbox," she says. "That is where biofabrication comes in. Biofabrication can deliver tailored materials with less waste and less impact on the environment. We hope that eventually consumers will ask for our materials by name when they buy their shoes, bags, furniture, and clothing in the coming years."

Modern Meadow is developing an in-house bioleather materials brand, [Zoa™](#), which it [previewed at the Museum of Modern Art](#) last fall, and expects to fully launch sometime next year. The material is the result of five years of research and development, and while there are [other startups](#) that say they are working on bioengineering animal-free fur, Lee says it's a complex problem to address.

"This is a wonderful aspiration but the reality is scientifically challenging," she says. "To fully grow fur would require you to build a whole organ, essentially like a hair follicle. Long before someone commercializes fur there likely will be more desirable hi-value biomedical applications from such a technology. At Modern Meadow we fully understand the technical challenges to grow a bioleather material, so for us fur is much further out."

Of course, that's not to say it will never be a reality, and change, as we've seen, can come from a groundswell of consumers speaking out and backing up their beliefs with their spending dollars. Banning fur outright won't solve the many issues in fashion's supply chains, particularly when the alternatives are petroleum-based textiles, but so much consumer interest in what has long been an opaque part the industry can only be a good thing.

What we do know for sure is that cheap, disposable clothing (and our habit of buying and throwing out so much of it) is wreaking havoc on the environment, so choosing high-quality pieces that will hold up over time, shopping vintage where possible and making conscientious choices about your wardrobe is always a step in the right direction.

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