

When a Friends of the Earth report claimed to have worked out the environmental footprint of a pair of leather boots, it was obvious to us there were glaring errors. A leather expert agrees the figures are 'ridiculous' and looks to add some clarity.

UK Leather Federation challenges boot claims

Definitive figures from the UK Leather Federation raise hard-hitting questions about the references to leather in a report widely published by campaign group Friends of the Earth.

Entitled 'Mind Your Step', the report sets out to highlight the environmental impact of seven consumer products, one of which is a pair of leather boots. Focusing specifically on the amount of land and the volume of water required to generate raw materials and make the finished product, it claims that the boots, made from an estimated 0.46 square-metres of leather from Brazil, would have a footprint of 50 square-metres of land and of 14,500 litres of water.

According to calculations from the UK Leather Federation, a calculation for land use of 45 square-metres would be more accurate in terms of cattle distribution, but in a statement submitted to *World Footwear*, the organisation said the Friends of the Earth figure "lacks context". The director of the UK Leather Federation, Dr Kerry Senior, added: "The land isn't being used to support the leather industry, but to rear cattle for meat. The hide remains a by-product."

The figure *Mind Your Step* gives for water, 14,500 litres to produce 0.46 square-metres of leather, is grossly inaccurate. Dr Senior told us that a figure of 59.8 litres would be in keeping with what the leather industry accepts as an average in the European Union, although he pointed out that many tanneries operate at much higher levels of efficiency in water use, some achieving figures that are half the average.

In the statement, he said Friends of the Earth's figure is "ridiculous" and explained that the vast majority of the 14,500 litres the campaign has included in its calculation is green water, that is, water from rain or snow.

"This is available only to plants," Dr Senior said, "would not recharge aquifers or rivers and will fall regardless of what is happening in the field it falls on. Adding this to the calculation is a way of pumping up the number."

He also said it is worth noting that green water will not be included in the calculation the European Commission has agreed to use to work out the environmental footprint of leather in its ongoing 'green product' project.

Dr Senior went on to say that, if anything, *Mind Your Step* may underestimate the amount of blue water (from freshwater sources) used in production in the tannery. The



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report puts this at just over 20 litres for the 0.46 square-metres of leather required to make the boots, whereas the UK Leather Federation director said all of his calculation of 59.8 litres would refer to the blue water tanneries have to consume.

In addition, he said the report's insistence on including higher numbers for leather produced in tanneries that do not treat wastewater effectively (acknowledging that it cannot level this criticism at the Brazilian leather in its own study) was "misleading". He also took exception to statements in Mind Your Step that claim leather production is "a determining factor" in beef farming and the allegation that chromium III is toxic.

"Leather is by-product of a renewable resource that is in demand by 90% of the global population," he concluded, "and tanneries are bound by environmental legislation the same as any other industry in any given region."

What can be done?

Many in the leather sector feel an anti-leather agenda began many years ago, and its momentum shows no sign of easing. Examples are easily found on the internet where inaccurate information is stated as fact. It is often unclear what the real objective of this material is, although some is clearly in support of a vegan anti-meat agenda wrapped up in animal rights and welfare. These beliefs should be as respected as any other belief, but opinions set down as hard statements should be balanced and supported by facts – not just selected pieces of information taken out of context, or material that is simply untrue.

There is a need for a better understanding of the industry by those individuals who influence purchases and selection of materials. This is not only in regard to the aesthetic requirements and physical properties of the leather and costings, but an awareness and regard for the corporate social responsibilities of a source of supply. So, what is to be done?

The publisher of *World Footwear*, through sister title *World Leather*, launched an initiative entitled "Nothing to hide", a series of articles by world-renowned academics and experts that aims to counter some of the misinformation with facts on the industry. After initial publication, all these essays are carried on the dedicated website, www.nothing-to-hide.org, and are freely available to any organisation or individual as a true overview of a responsible industry. 

'The land isn't being used to support the leather industry, but to rear cattle for meat. The hide remains a by-product,' says UK Leather Federation's Dr Kerry Senior.

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