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Leather good, plastic bad

For millenia, tanners have been doing the world a favour by taking a by-product in the form of hides from animals slaughtered for meat and turning them into leather. It was a logical thing to do as it turned waste material into a valuable product with a wide range of uses. Things have changed however, and the past few years have been difficult for the leather industry. 2019 has, if anything, become even worse as more and more footwear brands have dropped leather from their collections despite hides and skins now being so cheap. What began as a reaction to over inflated hide prices five years ago, appears to have become an all out attack on leather.

The global meat industry produces around one million cattle hides and three million sheep and goatskins per day or, put another way, around 1,250

and 250 container loads each. Global population for 2019 is projected to be more than 7.7 billion, of which over 1.3 billion are in India. With up to 42% said to be vegetarians, that leaves seven billion potential meat eaters. Of these, an estimated 210 million (3%) are vegans; a mere drop in the ocean. Nevertheless, veganism is very much on the increase, particularly in some Western countries, where vegan and sustainability have taken a leading role amongst marketeers.

This has been largely due to well-planned misinformation campaigns. It is a sad fact that few people really know what they are buying and even fewer really care. If it is called sustainable, it must be good. Companies using synthetic materials on a cost basis, suddenly claim sustainability when they collect and recycle a fraction of what they have

manufactured earlier. Another and, arguably more insidious message, is that veganism prevents cruelty to animals as in PETA's claim that shearing sheep for wool causes pain and distress. Opposing the rearing of animals for food and clothing therefore implies you are caring, a protector of the planet and a 'good' person.

But to return to the problem posed by the hides and skins produced by the meat industry. Hungary once tried to get rid of its raw hides by burying them when market prices were so low that it was uneconomical to preserve them. It soon found out that burying raw hides without the necessary precautions caused a bacterial infiltration of water layers and subsequent public health problems. So, it would appear that we cannot bury them; the landfill space required would in any case be prohibitive.

Burning them would release many tonnes of dioxins into the air. Using them for fertiliser is not workable either, again owing to the volume involved and the fact that there is a finite global demand for gelatin. The only practical solution, therefore, is to turn them into leather as in the past.

Despite creating a fuss out of all proportion to their numbers, could vegans really be able to influence meat consumption? Let's assume one million hides and three million skins are the by-product of 200 million kilogrammes of fresh meat per day. This means each person on earth would consume an average of 28 grammes of red meat per day.

Consumption per capita in the US, a high meat consumption country, is 100 kilogrammes per year, so one can readily see just how many people who would dearly love to eat it do not. Meat in any form is still a luxury in many countries, so whatever vegans might like to think, there will always be a global demand for it. Animals will be raised and slaughtered to provide it and a huge number of hides and skins will exist and would create a major environmental risk if not recycled in some way.

Demand for leather, however, stubbornly refuses to improve while, at the same time, slaughter rates continue to rise. In the US in 2018, 33 million head of cattle went to slaughter, up some 3% up on 2017. In

Brazil, it was 24.4 million head, a rise of more than 5%. The meat business is in fact thriving and packers are making good profits; too good in fact. At one time they would have worried about the high numbers of hides with no takers, and now they are seeing a profit of around \$130 per carcass, they seem unconcerned at the growing accumulation of unsold hides. In times past, they might have salted and stored them or sold them off at a favourable price for part-processing and storage until demand picked up. With the current situation of no takers, the only alternative is to let them go to waste.

With regards to the footwear industry, leather has been relegated to just another material in the large spectrum now available to modern designers who view style and fashion through a different lens. Consumers, particularly the young, have an increasingly brief attention span, prefer to live for the moment and not worry about the longevity or practicality of what they buy. They want shoes to be as cheap as possible so that they can throw them away at short notice when a new style appears. This is what drives the fashion industry and in turn encourages the use of cheap synthetics which will ultimately end up in landfill. It has become a self-sustaining vicious circle which, as things currently stand, it would appear hard to break.

The leather industry brought this

problem about by assuming that the footwear industry could not do without leather and so would have to pay whatever price was demanded. After five years of increasing misery, it does at last appear to have learnt its lesson and is now producing attractive materials at reasonable prices. The worry is that things may have moved too far in the acceptance of synthetics in footwear and that the horse has not only bolted but is over the hill and far away. One thing that footwear brands should remember, however, is that it is an increasingly changeable world where consumer sentiment can change or, increasingly, be changed.

Vegans want them to abandon leather and use plastics to combat global warming. Environmentalists bombard them with images of sea creatures choking to death on waste plastic and statistics showing how our water supplies are being contaminated with microfibres. Somebody has to wake up to the fact that there is no excuse for using more plastic than is necessary and there is no excuse for failing to use material that can have a significantly longer life cycle and save many resources. Put in simple terms, Leather good, plastic bad*. 🚫

**Adapted from 'Four legs good, two legs bad', key to the Seven Commandments of Animalism in George Orwell's famous book 'Animal Farm'.*



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