



Fur farming. Skin for skin?



Romania Gorbach

Department of Communication, Universitat Pompeu Fabra



romanija.gorbach@gmail.com



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Abstract

Fur production is still not only a huge ethical challenge all over the world, but also an economic and environmental one. Despite the fact that a large number of Western countries have banned fur farming because of its cruelty, irresponsibility and tremendously negative ecological impact, there are a number of countries where regulations are not so strict. For instance, Spain is still the world's fifth largest producer of rabbit's fur and meat, with more than three farms with six million rabbits. Also, there are other regions where fur farming is growing and gaining momentum. One of these so called "friendly" countries is Ukraine, where some international producers are relocating their fur production. With a poorly developed democracy and therefore no proper related regulations, the protection of nonhuman animals rights in this country is under great threat. However, these processes do not exist separately from civil society, which is the driving force behind the quality of the country. More and more civil organizations, government representatives and ordinary Ukrainians understand the global problems of this kind of industry. And not only do they understand, but they are also achieving changes in favor of "fur owners" rights.



Keywords:

Fur farming, nonhuman animals, rights, civil society, global fur industry.

1. Nonhuman animals: Physical and psychological consequences of modern fur farming

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves"
— Viktor E. Frankl (Frankl 2006, 184).

During the Second World War, millions of people were murdered in concentration camps in different parts of Europe. They were put in overcrowded small barracks, without any medical care, enough food or water. Kids, women and men spent months or even years in these cruel conditions until they were killed in the most inhumane ways, mostly in gas chambers.

Now we call it a crime against humanity. Because it is a crime, no doubt. We talk about ethics, rights, liberty and solidarity. We call our society more progressive and responsible than ever. But have we really progressed in the understanding of what crime is?

Nowadays millions of living creatures spend 24 hours, day after day, in small wire cages which create long lines. The living space in such modern barracks for each animal is approximately the size of a hand luggage. They are fed poor quality food and given water just to keep them alive. Sometimes they

are killed, sometimes they go crazy or even kill each other. There is almost no hope of being rescued in such places. For most of them, there comes a moment when they are killed by poison, electrocution or gassing.

We are talking about minks, foxes, raccoon dogs or other nonhuman animals who are being farmed for their fur. Some readers may think that they are only animals; who cares for one million nonhuman animals more or less? By contrast, the abuse of humans is a totally different story, a hot topic. Maybe, there will come a time when we, who so proudly call ourselves *homo sapiens*, will eventually realize the truth: that crime is always crime — it does not have logical, historical, economical or species justification.

According to Ripplezoo, every year approximately 75 million nonhuman animals — including minks, foxes and raccoon dogs — are reared and killed all in the name of fashion, with almost 32 million of these animals coming from farms situated in European countries such as Ireland, the United Kingdom, Finland and Poland (Payne 2018). And this does not include the more than one billion rabbits raised on fur farms or trapped in the wild and killed for their pelts every year in the world (Last Chance for Animals 2020).

Experts from the international organization Last Chance for Animals explain that minks, for instance, are naturally wild, very active (instinctively ranging a territory of approximately 741 acres in size) and do not adapt to life in captivity (Last Chance for Animals 2020). In contrast, ranch-raised minks are confined to a 12 by 18 inches cage — a type of confinement resulting in self-mutilation, cannibalism and high-level stress that weakens their immune system and makes animals more susceptible to disease (Last Chance for Animals 2020). According to the data this organization provides, many foxes develop psychotic behavior, literally bouncing off the walls of their cages as they pace furiously back and forth. In the end, they are finally electrocuted in order to preserve the fur — and approximately 10% of animals die every year due to stress and illness (Last Chance for Animals 2020).

Zoologists at Oxford University who studied captive minks found that “despite generations of being bred for fur, minks have not been domesticated and suffer greatly in captivity, especially if they are not given the opportunity to swim” (Mason 2001, 35–36).

2. Banning fur farming: International experiences

The well-known facts and the public opinion's pressure were important reasons for a number of European countries to ban fur farming (Fur Free Alliance 2019). According to Fur Free Alliance (2019), the pioneer in this process was United Kingdom, where fur farming was banned in 2000. The next one was Austria in 2004. In January 2018, Norway, once the world's largest producer of fox pelts, also decided to prohibit fur farming, after a phase-out period until 2025 (Fur Free Alliance 2019). Later, the list of stopping fur countries increased. For instance, in October 2019 Slovakia decided not to permit extreme animal cruelty, by

introducing a legislation that will end fur production by 2025 (Fur Free Alliance 2019).

Legislation to prohibit fur farming was also being considered in Ireland, Montenegro and Bulgaria in 2020. However, not all Western countries stand in solidarity with this trend. A prime example of this is Spain, where new mink farms are not permitted since 2007. However, Spain is still the world's fifth largest producer of rabbit's fur and meat with more than three Southland farms and six million rabbits there. The main producers, according to the Union of Small Farmers (UPA, Unión de Pequeños Agricultores y Ganaderos), are concentrated in Andalusia, Castilla-La Mancha and particularly in Catalonia. Despite the scale of production, local businessmen claim that nowadays fur production is not profitable because of Chinese cheap fur and meat; as a result, UPA commented for newspaper *El Mundo*, the price for Spanish rabbits dramatically dropped (Villaecija 2016).

Not only price is a big problem for fur producers. In 2014 non-profit animal organizations Last Chance for Animals and Animal Equality launched an online campaign based on a two-year investigation of 70 rabbit fur farms in Spain (Animal Equality 2020). According to this campaign, undercover investigators witnessed rabbits confined to tiny cages with unstable flooring for their entire two-year lives and farmworkers callously bashing sick rabbits to death. The investigators also recorded, with the help of hidden cameras, crippled, diseased and severely wounded rabbits that were left to suffer with no medical treatment (Animal Equality 2020). In addition, activists discovered that many world fashion brands were clients of these farms. They therefore requested these brands to abandon the use of natural fur.

3. "Fur friendly" countries or how Ukraine became an alternative market for the Western fur production

Nowadays, doing fur business has become increasingly difficult not only for fashion brands, but also for big fur producers because of current regulation in the sector. This is the reason why some farms from European countries have transferred their production to more "fur-friendly" countries — like, for instance, Ukraine.

According to Pavlo Vyshebaba (2020), head of the Ukrainian organization One Planet, the opening of two Dutch-owned farms in Ukraine has been reported. Another five farms were attempted to be open by Dane owners in the Lviv region (western part of Ukraine) and Zhytomyr region (central Ukraine):

However, after our public campaign "Fur Off" there was lots of noise. We explained in different ways to people what the environmental consequences could be after the opening of fur farms. Thousands of Ukrainians, cultural figures and scientists supported us. As a result, the Danish projects have been frozen. A Dutch businessman lost the court case and now he has to close the farm. Another of his compatriots has

already built a farm in Volyn (western region of Ukraine), but has not yet opened it. (Vyshebaba, 2020)

As explained by Pavlo Vyshebaba (2020), farmers from the Netherlands are moving their production to Ukraine because fur production has been banned in their country. The law will come into force in the Netherlands in 2024. A more complicated situation is found in Denmark. This country is the production leader along with China. However, the cost of production in China is cheaper. So, Denmark is looking for ways to compete. As a result, farms are being opened in countries with cheaper labor and fewer regulation — like Ukraine, Poland, Belarus or Russia.

Experts estimate that if foreign investors are allowed to open production in Ukraine, the volume of fur farms will double at once: from 620,000 killed animals per year to over 1,300,000 animals per year (Vyshebaba 2020). It should be noted that according to the Ukrainian legislation, every project of a fur farm must be approved at local public hearings. As Ukrainian eco activist and journalist Inna Teslenko confirms:

As a rule, peasants think about short-term benefits like some short-term job, and they are not informed at all about the harm of fur production to their health and environment. (Teslenko 2020).

Eco-activists together with Ukrainian politicians drafted a bill that would ban fur production in Ukraine in alignment with European countries. In October 2019, the law was registered in Parliament and the procedure for its consideration was under way when writing this paper.

In total, there are 37 fur farms officially active in Ukraine. According to the State Statistics Committee, minks account for 95% of all fur animals that are slaughtered in the country to produce fur (Ukrstat 2019).

In the eyes of ecologist Maksymovych Maryna (2020) these animals' waste contains high concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorus. Their excess is one of the most common forms of water pollution. In case of improper management of fur farm waste, chemicals contaminate local water systems. As a result, people have a lack of clean water.

4. Ecological crisis. Fur farming as one of the main sources of pollution

It is not only Ukrainian researchers that are concerned about environmental risks. The World Bank also ranks fur farms amongst the top five worst industries on the planet in terms of heavy metal pollution (Wheeler at al. 1999).

Moreover, research from independent Dutch organization Ce Delft concluded that producing one kilogram of fur requires more than 11 animals on average (Bijleveld at al. 2011). During its lifetime, minks eat about 50 kilograms of feed, resulting in 563 kilograms of feed required per kilogram of fur (Bijleveld at al. 2011). Although the feed consists mainly of offal and this is accounted for by a very low allocation of environmental impacts, the 563 kilograms required to

produce one kilogram of fur is a considerable knock on the total environmental footprint of fur and, for 14 of the 18 impact categories studied, feed is the predominant factor (Bijleveld et al. 2011). Compared with textiles, fur has a higher impact per kilogram in 17 of the 18 environmental categories, including climate change, eutrophication and toxic emissions. In many cases, fur has impacts that are a factor 2 to 28 higher than textiles, even when lower-bound values are taken for various links in the production chain (Bijleveld et al. 2011).

Scientists of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences (NAAS) also agree with their foreign colleagues. They note that the farmed animals produce a large amount of waste, which pollutes the fertile Ukrainian land (Palapa et al. 2016). When high doses of manure are applied to soil, they are contaminated with heavy metals, as proved by the research conducted on rural settlements of Ukraine (Palapa et al. 2016). NAAS noted that the result of such fertilization of agricultural crops causes a decrease in soil fertility.

As environmental journalist Mariana Verbovska clarifies, the litter of holes in Ukraine is thrown out on the nearest fields. The area of illegal dumps reaches several hectares and is repeatedly recorded by residents. Besides gases emitted from animal droppings, significant air pollution occurs when their corpses are burned — a common method of disposal. The journalist narrates that after slaughtering animals through suffocation in gas chambers, lethal injection, neck breakage or anal electroshock on fur farms, their bodies are skinned — sometimes with the animal still conscious — for tanning and sometimes submitted to further treatment, such as dyeing, bleaching, etc. (Verbovska 2020).

Common substances for tanning skins are formaldehyde and chromium, both of which are on the list of carcinogens and toxins harmful to human health. The European Commission considers air pollution to be one of the main eco-problems of tanning, since toxic and odorous substances are released as part of the standard operations of this process (Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare 2001).

Also, toxic substances have a negative impact on the health of farmworkers. Devices where animals are kept usually have no walls but only a roof, so in winter workers who clean after animals should spend a significant part of their time in the cold, and in summer in the heat. According to the Pavlo Vyshebababa (2020) from One planet, Ukrainian workers from a countryside who already have a fur farm nearby, they can work for more than two months under such working conditions. Stench and toxic substances cause migraines, sleep disturbance, allergic reactions and respiratory diseases.

Due to the rapid deterioration of the environmental situation in Ukraine, the discussion regarding the use of artificial fur as an alternative to natural fur production is becoming increasingly popular. In particular, the environmental impact of artificial and natural fur was compared in another study by CE Delft. The organization developed a life-cycle analysis (LCA) of animal fur using the example of mines, which allowed to determine the environmental impact at

different stages of its production. In the absolute majority of comparable indicators, the environmental advantage was on the side of fake fur: natural fur is inferior to its alternatives on 18 of 19 indicators (Bijleveld 2013).

5. Fur fashion: Why Ukrainians refuse to wear natural fur

After the discussion about fur farming increased, many Ukrainians refused to wear natural fur. For instance, Solomiya (2020), a 28 year-old lawyer from Lviv, said: “For many years I was wearing natural fur, as it was fashionable. I did not accept my coat as a skin of poor animals. First of all, for me it was just nice and expensive thing. And only with time when our media started to talk more about fur industry, I started to realize the real situation. Now I refused to use any natural fur stuff. I realized that it is not moral to be a part of killing innocent animals”.

Meanwhile, not all Ukrainians are ready to say no to natural fur. Kiril (2020) a 35 year-old photographer from Kyiv, shared: “Personally I do not buy fur, as I simply do not like it and could not accept the cruel way how big producers got the fur. But my mom, for instance, likes it very much. I think it is unfair to stigmatize her because of her taste or position. Maybe it's going to take some time for people to give up their furs, especially in our country, where such stuff is still very prestige”.

It is true that you simply cannot dictate your own moral code to someone, also considering the fact that we live in a world with an extremely large roster of challenges. But the most difficult and at the same time the most valuable challenge is still a wish to change yourself. We can provide very complicated data about fur production, reiterate once in a blue moon how it is cruel to kill other animals for their fur. However, these facts do not always have the influence we expect. Why? Maybe they must be a part of our own experience, or it is that our understanding of crime is very metaphorical. There is no one correct answer.

Nonhuman animals do not have a verbal, human voice to speak out against fashion fur, but that does not mean they do not communicate with us and among each other using their own means of expression and language. Eventually if we try to understand them better, they definitely will ask us why we are so obsessed with their skin. Or, even more, they could propose to make an exchange — skin for skin. All in good faith — in a very business human way.



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