

## Not in my skin

By [Zahava Katz-Perlish, I am An Animal Too](#)

December 2017

*For Natalia Skrypnikova*

I was thrilled when a friend of mine suggested I write about vegan apparel. I love fashion and that's an opportunity to explore one aspect of it, leather, which the fashion industry presents as something glamorous. But what kind of glamour is there in a product that is made from parts of animal bodies like cows or dogs, based on human exploitation, and is one of the worst polluting industries on the planet? I'm glad to report, all that is fast changing and eco-friendly, vegan leather is the new trend! I confess, before being vegan I purchased items made from leather, wool, down, and silk, not thinking twice about it. Even though I didn't eat meat for decades I foolishly assumed that leather is no more than a byproduct of the meat industry and that's why it's fine to use. I did not think or know much about other animal-based materials either. However, once I realized that non-human animals, much like humans, should not be treated as commodities or revenue generators, the light bulb went off – I should not purchase anything that is part of an animal's body or based on their exploitation. This realization came into sharp focus when I learned how those materials are procured.



There is much to say about obtaining wool, down, silk and fur, from animals, but I'll focus on leather which is most commonly used, and is an industry worth billions of dollars. Leather, let's not fool ourselves, is the skin of an animal, who did not want to die to be your gloves, belt, or shoes. And it isn't exactly a byproduct of the meat industry. It's part of the global animal agriculture business and generates a significant portion of its profits.

Leather is made primarily from cows, pigs, goats and sheep. Heartbreakingly, the softest and more expensive leather is prepared from the skin of newborn or even unborn baby cows, cut out of their mother's wombs. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw unborn calf skin items for sale on websites such as Etsy, eBay and [chichesterinc.com/CalfSkinsUnborn!](http://chichesterinc.com/CalfSkinsUnborn/)

Leather is also made from [alligators, crocodiles, snakes and ostriches](#), who are kept captive under horrific conditions, and killed using brutal methods such as skinning the animals alive. In Australia [Kangaroos are slaughtered by the millions every year](#) so their skins can be used for soccer shoes and other sport items.

And let's not forget the millions of [dogs and cats who are slaughtered for their meat and skin in China](#), the largest exporter of leather products. You may unknowingly wear dog skin gloves that are labeled, for example, as "made in Italy". Keep in mind, the origin of leather – what animal it's made from – is not required to be disclosed, and companies have a financial incentive not to make it transparent.

Much of the global leather trade starts in developing countries. The short video [Hell for Leather](#), shows the transport of cows between India and Bangladesh which was described by the [Guardian](#): "...as they are driven along dusty roads for hours and hours, abused and tortured with every mile. Finally the animals are skinned (in front of each other) in the back streets of Dhaka. The skins are processed in makeshift tanneries with workers, including children, knee deep in toxic chemicals."

The treatment of animals killed for meat and skin in the U.S. and other western countries is appalling as well. Millions of cows and other animals suffer the daily brutality of factory farming: extreme crowding, cruel mistreatment, and castration, branding, tail-docking, and dehorning, all without any anesthetics. Not to mention the ultimate brutality of slaughtering the animals. Some people may buy into the fake notion of eating "humane" meat, but shouldn't we be as concerned about the mistreatment of animals who are used for leather as we are for the ones used for meat?

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You may not be aware that the leather industry is exploiting and killing not only animals but also humans, including children. The cheap labor combined with lax child labor and workplace safety and environmental laws and regulations and/or enforcement, make poor nations in Asia the center of leather production for the West. In India, [toxic chemicals used in tanneries are poisoning their workers](#). The same is happening in [Bangladesh](#) where thousands work in the tanneries, including children who are responsible for dangerous tasks like dipping hides in acid. Work is done without protective gear or even shoes. According to the [World Health Organization's report](#) about half a million residents of Dhaka, are at risk of serious illness due to chemical pollution from tanneries near their homes. 90% of the workers at the tanneries die before the age of 50, and about a quarter of the workers are children under the age of 11 years old.

To understand the issue I highly recommend watching this [PBS video](#) about the exposure of workers, many of them are children, to the toxic chemicals of tanneries in Bangladesh. Not only the workers are harmed but residential areas around tanneries are polluted. Tens of thousands of people, including children, come into contact with the chemicals in tannery wastewater that is released untreated into neighborhoods.

The leather manufacturing is considered one of the most polluting industries on the planet. In addition to polluting the environment by raising animals, the production itself requires the use of a variety of hazardous chemicals that are [harmful to humans and the environment](#). Those include: chromium, mineral salts, formaldehyde, coal-tar derivatives, various oils, dyes, and finishes, some of them cyanide-based. Most leather is chrome-tanned. All wastes containing chromium are considered hazardous by the US Environmental Protection Agency. Chromium can make its way [into air, water, soil and, food](#). Indeed, [the leather industry is killing people and their environment](#).

The good news is that there are many leather substitutes made without harming human and non-human animals; much of it is indistinguishable from real leather and also cheaper. Artificial leather is made from various eco-friendly materials such as [apple peels](#), [pineapple](#), [mushrooms](#), [wood pulp](#), [cork](#), recycled tires, and also from plastics. According to [Forbes](#), vegan leather will be a major trend for 2018!

As reported by [Drive](#), the car industry is making progress as well. Companies such as Tesla offer leather free options for consumers upset by the fact it can take anywhere from five to 15 cows to create a leather interior.



*Vegan leather shoes made from apple skin (Photo: VEERAH)*

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As for fashion, here are a few designers and retailers that offer sustainable, vegan leather goods such as shoes and accessories: [Beyond Skin](#), [Bourgeois Boehme](#), [Matt and Nat](#), [Moshes](#), [Veeral](#) (sells shoes that are made from sustainable materials such as apple peel and cork) and [Brave Gentleman](#).

[Stella McCartney](#) is an upscale fashion brand. As reported by the [Guardian](#), “anyone who has ever held a Stella McCartney bag and had a good look at one can testify that they’re every bit as alluring in weight and softness as a top-grade leather; that they do appear to be as good as the real thing – better, if you factor in the environmental damage and loss of life they’ve displaced.” Other designers, Vika Gazinskaya, Felder Felder and Ann-Sofie, to name a few, also have only animal free leather in their collections.

There are many fabulous and stylish brands of vegan leather goods; check out some in the following links for [bags](#), [jackets](#), [shoes](#) and [everything](#).

If you shop online on sites such as Zappos or Amazon, simply type the word vegan and the product you are looking for, into the search bar, such as “vegan shoes”. You’ll be surprised how many products are made from cruelty free leather. Some retail companies’ websites have specific pages dedicated to vegan goods such as [Free People](#) and [Lulu’s](#). And you can step into stores like TJ Maxx, H&M, Nordstrom Rack and Payless and find beautiful (and reasonably priced) faux leather merchandise. By purchasing cruelty free vegan, leather instead of animal skin, you’ll not only prevent the needless killing and suffering of animals, but you will also stop supporting the exploitation and poisoning of humans who work in the tanneries, and the pollution of our planet.

Next time you make a purchase, please think about who and what it’s made from. If it was made from a sentient creature, consider its entire horrific and brutal manufacturing process, and choose kindness. Go vegan!

I wish all of you a happy, compassionate and stylish new year!