

REAL VS. PLASTIC: IS NATURAL FUR “SUSTAINABLE?”

Mark Oaten of the International Fur Federation talks to WWD about the sustainability of fur and misconceptions about the fur industry.

As consumer demand for ethically sourced and manufactured apparel continues to flourish, brands and retailers are faced with an amalgam of challenges in fully embracing sustainability. And the topic of fur, which has divided the fashion industry for decades, has again come into full focus as the debate around labeling fur as “sustainable” marches forward.

Mark Oaten, the chief executive officer of the International Fur Federation, develops global certification and traceability programs with fashion brands and organizations across 40 countries. Prior to his role, Oaten had a longstanding career in politics, serving as a Member of Parliament in the U.K. for 13 years and as a U.K. member of the Council of Europe.

Here, Oaten talks to WWD about the sustainability of fur and misconceptions about the fur industry.

WWD Studios: What are some of the biggest issues generated by animal rights groups?

Mark Oaten: I think that the whole animal rights’ issue is about choice. I can respect people that don’t want to buy fur,

but in return groups like PETA should not dictate to the public what they should do. People should be allowed to make a choice themselves on buying fur. Freedom of choice is for me a basic principle. I am fine with a serious debate, but find the animal right aggressive tactics such as spitting and taunting at people totally unacceptable. This whole approach of a vegan agenda does worry me. What is next? Banning wool, leather and silk?

WWD Studios: As the fashion industry evolves and includes more socially aware consumers, how does the fur industry respond?

M.O.: Today’s fashion is all about the eco footprint and understanding the source of materials, and making sure the entire production chain is responsible and regulated. The fur industry is not new to this system, especially [since] that we work with one of the most natural products in fashion. We have been developing and sustaining high levels of standards across our production processes with science based studies for years now. We continue to do so by reaching to further parts of the globe where certification is needed with a clear near future objective to launch a program branded FurMark making only certified

“
[Fur] is a vital sector that plays a substantial part in the economy and in the fashion retail scene.”

and regulated fur available for the public with clearly traced origins, minimal impact on the environment and with animal fare at the core of our values branded.

WWD Studios: What do you think are the some of the biggest misconceptions around the fur industry?

M.O.: One of the main misconceptions I continued to hear from a close circle of friends as I joined the fur industry was that a fur coat is old fashioned. It was quickly apparent how modern fur is, especially as I see the fashion weeks regularly showing fur. Apart from catwalks, the IFF’s annual fashion campaign, FUR



Mark Oaten
Chief Executive Officer of the
International Fur Federation

NOW, is proof enough of how dynamic and versatile fur is. It can be worn by the mature and the young, whether in high octane fashion or street style with trainers, in an array of bold or natural colors - and all year long!

WWD Studios: How does fur fare against other faux fur materials such as synthetic fur?

M.O.: There is a lot of talk about fake fur these days, for me it makes no sense to use a product full of chemicals and plastics when you can have a natural and biodegradable fashion item like real fur.

We have seen the recent documentaries on plastics in our oceans and the overwhelming piling mountains of landfills caused by fast fashion and cheap plastic material. How can we compare fake to real when you can own a fur coat for life?

WWD Studios: What do consumers need to do know to make more informed purchases when it comes to fur to ensure they are shopping responsibly for it?

M.O.: It is hard for consumers when they get so much information. And also when they are faced with animal rights’ heavily funded agendas, credible information gets blurred and misconceptions about fur flood the media. In America, the Fur Information Council of America does a great job in promoting fur and informing and re-assuring consumers. Looking ahead, I think our global traceability and certification program, FurMark, will help to reassure retailers and consumers that they are buying fur from responsible sources.

WWD Studios: Who are the major players in the fur industry that are taking steps to ensure that the highest standards are being met?

M.O.: Everybody who is involved in the fur trade has a responsibility to work with the highest standards. The International Fur Federation takes a global lead on this



Alexander Wang
FW 18 Collection



Oscar De La Renta
FW 17 Collection



Anna Sui
FW 17 Collection

with our FurMark program but we depend on our regional members and partners to deliver. In the U.S., IFF America works closely with The Fur Information Council of America, FICA, to promote the best standards in fur and across North America. One of the top auction houses in this part of the world is NAFA and they have a strong commitment to high

Making the case for sustainable fur

A Consumer demands for ethical goods is accelerating adoption of sustainability practices.

farming standards. Collectively, we are all responsible for making sure the industry remain active and relevant.

Market Analysis

As the market for sustainable goods and apparel has burgeoned in recent years, the jury is still out on what truly defines a product as “responsibly” or “sustainably” made. And now that ethical manufacturing and ecological materials are key areas of development in textiles and fashion at large, the topic of sustainable fur remains to be controversial and divided.

More than 65 percent of emerging market consumers actively seek sustainable fashion, compared to 32 percent or less in established markets, according to a McKinsey and Co. report. And the uptick in consumer demand for ethical goods and apparel is quickening the process for the adoption of industry-wide sustainability, as brands and retailers are incorporating the use of natural materials, reevaluating their supply chains and streamlining production to cater to shoppers’ rising standards.

While designers such as Fendi, Saint Laurent, Louis Vuitton and Christian Dior are known for their artistry with fur across apparel and accessories collections, a number of fashion brands have



Coach
FW 17 Collection

adopted fur-free policies, including Stella McCartney, Vivienne Westwood, Tommy Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Armani, and as of late last year, Gucci.

According to the International Fur Federation (IFF), global fur sales have almost tripled in recent years, rising from \$15.6 billion in 2011 to more than \$40 billion in 2015. The IFF’s digital platform, “We Are Fur,” is a trade body with 55 members across 38 countries. As the sole organization that represents the international fur industry, its members sign a Code of Practice agreeing to respect rules and regulations within their country or region regarding animal welfare, environmental standards, employment laws, and anti-trust, bribery and corruption laws, as well as international conventions inclusive of CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

Mark Oaten, the chief executive officer at the IFF, told WWD, “The world total fur retail sales [today] is estimated at \$30 billion. It also generates millions of jobs, from farming in rural communities to design and skilled craftsmen in fashion

cities across the globe. It is a vital sector that plays a substantial part in the economy and in the fashion retail scene.”

Oaten added, “About 70 percent of the current high fashion brands’ catwalks in the big major fashion cities show fur, as designers love to work with this natural product. Many attribute its uniqueness to the touch and feel, whilst others have described it as ‘the epitome of modern artisanal craftsmanship’.”

Fallacy of Faux Fur

And while a slew of brands and retailers select faux furs to promote and claim sustainability, some argue that faux fur materials are just as controversial, as petroleum, plastic and hazardous chemicals are used in its production; and, faux fur is not biodegradable. Non-renewable products such as nylon, acrylic and polyester are commonly used in faux fur, which is later treated with chemicals and heat to soften the material. In some cases, fur garments are thought of as a safer alternative, as they are a wholly natural product and biodegradable.

Céline Semaan, an MIT Media Lab

Director’s Fellow and the founder of Slow Factory, a sustainable apparel and accessories company, told WWD, “The U.S. Sustainable Apparel Coalition ranked acrylic [as] 39 out of 48 on its list of fabrics with the worst effect on the environment. So when buying fake fur, you may be saving an animal’s life, but not for long, as the toxic aftermath of synthetic fur ends up causing more harm to our planet than buying, say, a vintage fur coat.”

Strides in Sustainability

On the sustainable fur front, fur brands source sustainable raw materials through a variety of auction houses, which are working to enable supply chain transparency. Brands employ suppliers to help integrate offerings that hail exclusively from regulated sources.

This includes leveraging “pelt traceability programs” that allows manufacturers to trace pelt lots to their origin at individual farms. Some auction houses are also looking at technology such as RFID, which will enable consumers to scan and trace fur through the entire supply chain from the point of purchase.

And Oaten said that the stronger promotion of fur as a natural, sustainable product relies on the industry itself. “Moving forward though, I think that the fur industry needs to do more to promote its sustainable qualities and be proud to shout out that we have a wonderful, natural product that is modern and affordable for young people. It is already exciting to see how designers have creatively diversified the use of fur [by] integrating it into accessories, on bag straps, pompom hats, backpacks, key rings, sandals, etc. I do believe the next breakthrough will be the menswear category and its use of fur – there is huge potential there.”

Oaten continued, “I am really pleased that young designers are turning to fur and we keep encouraging them to get involved, especially through our global annual competition, REMIX, with the theme of ‘From Nature to Nature.’ [The competition] capitalizes on our commitment to sustainability and we help support the next generation of designers.”

REMIX is in partnership with Vogue Talents and will take place in Milan this year on Feb. 25th.



REMIX 2016
MAIN SHOW