

Committee/Council: Environmental committee

Issue: The issue of animal cruelty in the exotic skins business

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Position: President

Introduction

Animals have been a food source for humans for thousands of years. Nowadays livestock remains a main source for food but at the same time animals have also become a means of procuring goods such as their leather and other goods originating from them. However, there is a difference between killing animals to obtain these goods and torturing them for the purpose of skins business. Every year millions of reptiles in Indonesia are brutally slaughtered and skinned and that happens not in just one country. The aforementioned phenomenon occurs in multiple countries with ostriches, crocodiles, lizards, snakes and other animals in order to make products such as handbags, watches or boots. It takes



1 Crocodile slaughterhouse

3 or 4 crocodiles to get enough leather for a single bag and this is not taking place secretly, since these bags are commercial products that are sold publicly by companies such as Louis Vuitton and Hermes. Making animals suffer by using very cruel slaughtering methods as well as poor captivity conditions is a prime example of animal cruelty. Unfortunately, the worst part is that almost no action is actually taking place against such unnecessary cruelty and a big part of the work has been left to independent activist groups whereas coordinated government action is lackluster. Only recently has drastic action begun to take place such as India's ban on exotic skin imports and PETA's fake shop aiming to shock customers with images portraying the cruelty to these animals. However this is still not enough. There is no international legislation protecting these animals from this treatment other than the CITES regulation (Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna) which does not completely cover the issue and is poorly enforced in some countries. Thus, there is a great need to take coordinated action against this cruelty before it further threatens the animals involved.

Definition of Key-Terms

Exotic skins

Exotic skins include all animal skins that are not taken from cows, sheep, goats or pigs. These include crocodiles, lizards, snakes, stingrays, ostriches, elephants and various others. However, the main focus is on crocodiles, snakes and ostriches as they are the most traded skins.

Animal cruelty

Animal cruelty is the act of inflicting physical pain, suffering or death on an animal beyond what is deemed as necessary. "It can include neglect that is so monstrous (withholding food and water) that the animal has suffered, died or been put in imminent danger of death."¹

Background Information

Captivity

The animals from which the skins are procured have horrible living conditions including lack of food and water, sunlight and medical care as well as life in spaces so cramped that animal experts have pronounced them inhuman.

Crocodiles

Crocodiles in particular, have to deal with such issues. Investigators in crocodile farms in Vietnam have uncovered thousands of crocodiles living in concrete enclosures sometimes smaller than their own bodies for up to 15 months in a completely lethargic state before they are killed. In similar farms in the area they are thrown into concrete pits which are so cramped that as expected the crocodiles get aggressive and injure each other which due to lack of medical care leads to infections.



2 Crocodile farm in Indonesia

Snakes

Snakes are in fact rarely held in captivity as they reproduce slowly and breeding them is a high-cost operation. Despite that, farms are built in order to act

¹ "Animal Cruelty." The Free Dictionary, Farlex, legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Animal+cruelty.

as a cover for snake hunting in the wild. The cause for concern is not the conditions in which they are held in captivity but the fact that hundreds of thousands of snakes are being skinned each year, nearly all of them caught in the wild, greatly contributing to the further endangerment of already threatened species such as pythons.

Ostriches

Ostriches are kept on completely barren dirt areas. Their eggs are taken from them and placed in incubators, so parents never get to see their own offspring. They are transported to the slaughterhouse in trucks, where they are completely cramped considering they are normally open prairie animals. Additionally the ones in charge of the transport even hit them for no reason. Then they are placed into another confined area where they wait in line to be slaughtered, able to see the ones before them getting killed.



3 Ostriches being transported

Slaughter

The killing methods used for the animals are needlessly inhuman and cause lot of suffering. They are often skinned while they are still alive.

Crocodiles

Crocodiles are usually killed by stunning them with electric shocks and then by making an incision into their necks (which they survive because they can live for a long time without oxygen). Finally steel rods are rammed down their spines. There are three problems with this method: firstly they suffer unnecessarily in the best of cases. Secondly the workers very often fail to hit their spines and must ram them multiple times until finally hitting the spine. Lastly even after this long process many crocodiles are skinned alive while being fully conscious. Another method of stunning the crocodiles is repeatedly shooting them in the head with a captive-bolt gun, which fires off blunt projectiles designed to knock out animals or sometimes designed to penetrate the skull and destroy brain matter for that purpose.

Snakes

There is a false belief that snakeskin is best when peeled off an alive snake.



4 Pile of dead snakes in Indonesian slaughterhouse

Therefore, many skinning methods ensure that the snake remains alive during the process. A common method of killing them is nailing them to trees, slicing their bodies open from end to end and skinning them in that state. Due to their slow metabolism, the snakes survive this and suffer throughout the whole process, before being thrown in piles on top of each other to be left to die there which can take hours or even days. Another method to kill a snake is to tie up its mouth and anus with rubber bands and then to make it suffocate by pumping water or air into it.

Other slaughtering methods

Ostriches are placed into a special machine which turns them and shocks their head in order to stun them. Then they are removed and their throats are cut in half.

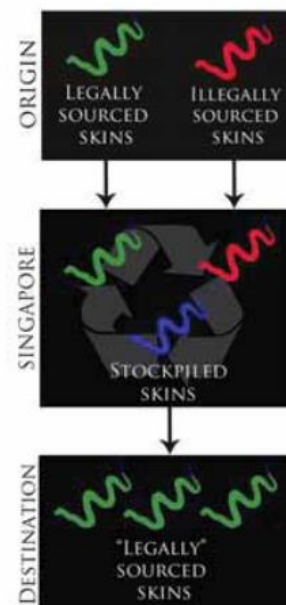
Lizards' necks are slit open much like crocodiles, except that it is to the point that they are nearly decapitated and are then skinned, some still moving.

Kangaroos are decapitated or hit on the head with the intent to destroy their brain.

Eels have their necks sliced open, their guts removed, then are skinned and lastly decapitated. They are alive up to the point of decapitation which amounts to unnecessary suffering.

Black market

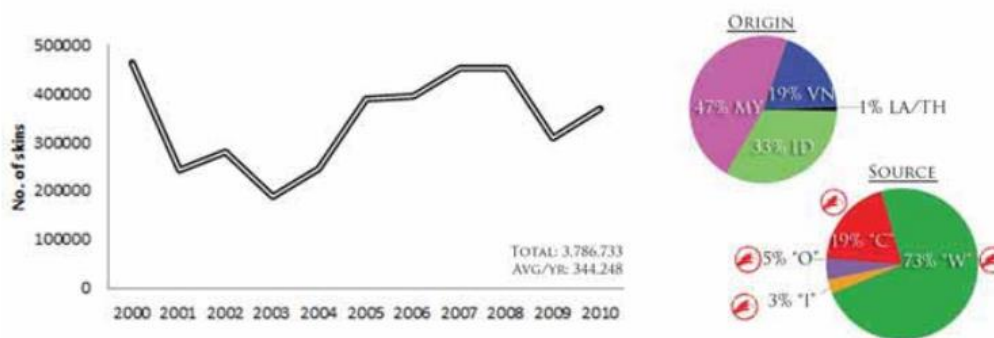
The black market demand for exotic skins is huge, especially for python skins that are protected by CITES regulations. In 2005, 350000 snake skins were worth US-\$100 million and in 2014 the same amount was worth US-\$10 billion. This shows how much the value of the skins keeps growing. Although few countries have placed bans on specific imports, like the EU has banned python imports from Malaysia, the way the illegal skin market works bypasses such bans. Singapore is the largest venue for the illegal skin trade and this is abused by exporters in Asia. Often exporters in Singapore stockpile their skins and traders do not declare their stocks so authorities are unable to know the amount and origin of their stock. Because of this illegal skins can be mixed with legal ones without being noticed since an increase in stock is



5 Illustration explaining how illegal skins mix with legal ones

not recorded. This results in illegal skins being re-exported in legal shipments, a method safer and more cost-efficient than directly exporting illegal skins. Another common method is simply stating that they are carrying pieces of skins rather than whole skins or even something else altogether which often succeeds due to poor control and monitoring. The highest-grade skins are then exported to Italy, Germany, France and Spain and the rest, which account for 30% of the total export, are shipped to the USA, Mexico and China.²

Figure 7 Reticulated Python skin direct exports 2000-2010, their origin and source.



Data source: CITES Trade Database.

This chart shows the amount of exotic skins exported each year from Vietnam (VN), Malaysia (MY), Indonesia (ID) and Thailand (TH). Additionally it shows the source of these skins with 73% coming from the wild (W), 19% from captive-bred animals (C) and the remaining 8% either from illegal shipments (I) or specimens existing before CITES (O). However all of these sources show signs of suspicious trade activity indicated by the red snakehead symbol.

Arguments in favor of the exotic skin industry

An effort to support the exotic leather industry was made by the company Pan-American Leathers, self-proclaimed largest US exotic leather tannery provides leather to various brands such as Nike and Ralph Lauren, with a list titled “Busting 3 Exotic Leather Myths”. “All exotic leather harvesting is cruel” is the most common myth. The company tries to debunk this myth stating that only in rare cases cruelty is involved and that animal skin is best when animals are treated humanely. However,

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www.intracen.org/uploadedFiles/intracenorg/Content/Publications/The%20Trade%20in%20Southeast%20Asian%20Python%20Skins%20for%20web.pdf+page+32.

investigations by activists such as PETA have revealed the opposite. Furthermore, despite of the fact that leather has better quality when animals are not treated cruelly, farms use brutal killing methods because they are easier and cheaper to implement. The second most common myth is that “exotic leather harvesting contributes to the extinction of species”. The argument goes that farms help protect species. However, that is not the case with pythons as has been established above and moreover keeping animals in cruel conditions is not an appealing alternative for extinction. The last myth states that “exotic leather isn’t that different from cow leather” and it refers to the much higher quality of exotic skins which is true but still amounts to a simple marketing gimmick as it doesn’t give a reason as to justify the cruelty in the exotic skins business.

Brands such as Hermes or the luxury group Kering have expressed sympathy for the mistreatment of animals; however the case of Hermes below shows that even then control is needed. In 2015 following investigations of PETA in crocodile and alligator farms which abused animals in Zimbabwe and Texas, Hermes stated that they would investigate and punish those in charge of the farms. Not long after, in February 2016 PETA investigations revealed an ostrich farm using cruel methods in South Africa which also provided ostrich leather to Hermes.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Singapore

Singapore is the largest venue for exporting exotic skins due to various factors such as its location, global shipping routes and efficient port, specifically 31% of Indonesia’s reticulated python skins, 64% of Malaysia’s and 61% of Vietnam’s are exported to Singapore. Due to the fact that traders do not declare their stock it is common practice for smuggled skins to be mixed with legal ones and subsequently be re-exported as such.

Vietnam

Vietnam does not have any animal laws and because of that some of the largest crocodile and python farms are based there and the cruelest slaughter methods are used without fearing any authorities.

Indonesia & Malaysia

Indonesia and Malaysia are the largest producers of python skin and the EU has even decided to ban python skin imports from Malaysia. In both areas, there is no knowledge regarding the human treatment of animals and laws protecting the endangered species are not sufficiently enforced. Both countries smuggle their illegal skins to Singapore in order for them to be re-exported.

India

India is the first country to individually take drastic action against exotic skins. After pressure from activist groups in collaboration with the Minister of women and child development Maneka Gandhi decided that due to the cruelty involved in the illegal skins import business, skins of reptiles, minks, foxes and chinchillas should be banned.³

PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals)

PETA is an animal welfare group founded in 1980 and has grown to be one of the largest animal rights groups. On this topic, PETA has been the biggest contributor, having investigated multiple animal farms. In addition, PETA has bought stakes into some of the largest brands for the sake of attending stakeholders' meetings where they attempt to persuade the other stakeholders to stop using exotic skins in the brand.⁴ Lastly the most drastic measure taken by PETA was setting up a store in Thailand with exotic leather products. However, the products, designed to shock customers, were filled with fake blood, fake hearts and sinews in order to convey the message of the cruelty the animals face.



6 Scene from PETA's fake shop

International Trade Center (ITC)

The ITC alongside a few other organisations has published a report on Southeast Asia detailing the production process of the exotic leather trade as well as relevant regulations, investigations on the killing methods and finally recommendations on combating the issue.

Timeline of Events

³ <http://www.petaindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/DGFT-Notification.pdf>

⁴ "Animal Rights Activist Peta Buys Stake in Louis Vuitton." BBC News, BBC, 13 Jan. 2017, www.bbc.com/news/business-38608231.

Date	Description of event
1 July 1975	CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) enters into force
2002	EU bans import of python skins from Malaysia
2004	The Manila Declaration is made by a few countries emphasizing the need to ensure welfare of animals
2012	The International Trade Centre releases a report titled "The Trade in South-East Asian Python Skins"
20 December 2013	3 rd of March is proclaimed as World Wildlife Day
2015-present	PETA investigates multiple exotic animal farms and publicizes the cruelty happening in them
3 January 2017	India issues a ban on exotic animal skins

Relevant UN Treaties, Resolutions and Events

CITES(Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora)

CITES is one of the most accepted treaties. 183 parties are included in the treaty. The treaty offers a framework for international cooperation to protect endangered species by setting standards for the import, export and re-export of species as well as a licensing system. However, the aforementioned is the only action the UN has taken against this issue.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Unfortunately, the only organisations that have contributed to solving this issue are animal rights groups and global efforts have been minimal to non-existent. Many of the actions that were taken by activist groups, mainly PETA have been outlined above. In addition to that, Kering, a global luxury group has plans to make a snake farm in order to secure a source for leather. Considering that it plans to keep the farm in animal-friendly conditions, this can be very beneficial as it ensures that

the skins are not the product of unnecessary cruelty and furthermore it ensures that snakes are protected from endangerment since they have a safe area to breed.

Possible Solutions

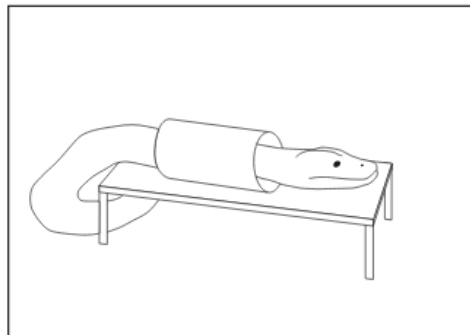
There are multiple solutions for this issue. Firstly, more human production methods must be introduced which will ensure that animals do not suffer during the process. An example is the anvil type slaughter system proposed by the ITC which destroys the brain in a single blow, thus instantly killing any animal. It is a system mostly meant for snakes but could with adjustments be used for other animals too. It also has the advantage of being low-cost so it can be

implemented even in areas with lower economic development. Furthermore, it is necessary to ensure that countries have and properly enforce animal welfare laws. One way to do this, although it is not supported by all countries is the introduction of a Universal Declaration on Animal Welfare in order to globally ensure that animals are treated humanely. Moreover, it is necessary for existing animal laws to be more strictly enforced.

Additionally, in order to combat the re-exporting of skins and the mixing of legal and illegal ones, it is necessary to implement a system which will allow the tracing and monitoring of the individual skins from the slaughterhouse up to the manufacturer such as a tag or barcode on each skin. This, aside from traceability, allows illegal skins, which will not have a barcode/tag or at least not a valid one to be distinguished from legal skins which will have one. To this extent transparency of the traders' stocks should also be increased for example by making an inventory of stocks in order to avoid traders declaring different goods that they are carrying.

Overall what can serve as a guideline for avoiding animal cruelty are the aforementioned myths that Pan-American leathers tried to debunk. If those were actually myths then the industry would more animal-friendly, because in this way animals would not be treated cruelly and farms could serve as safe breeding grounds for endangered animals. A more drastic measure would be to outright ban illegal skin imports following the example of India. This would also harm the black market trade since as explained previously the illegal skins need to be mixed with the legal ones in order to be exported, so if there are no legal skins this will not be a possible method.

Figure 42 Anvil type slaughter system



7 Anvil type slaughter system proposed by the ITC

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