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FUN FUR?

A report on the Chinese fur industry

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Executive summary

This is the first ever report from inside China's fur farms. It is based on field and desk research carried out in 2004 and January 2005. Several farms in Hebei Province were visited as part of this field research. Numbers of animals held at these facilities ranged from 50 to 6000. The report provides background information on the Chinese fur industry and describes and documents husbandry and slaughter practices. It goes on to place China's role as the world's largest exporter of fur garments into a global context, which involves direct links to the EU and the UK. It ends in a set of urgent recommendations for national and international policy makers, as well as members of the British and European public.

For at least ten years, the international fur industry has waged a coordinated, well funded and slick global PR campaign aimed at dispelling the moral stigma attached to wearing fur. Mixing fur with silk, wool, suede and leather, employing new manufacturing processes such as shearing and knitting, as well as new fashionable colours, have added novelty and versatility to fur. Steadily increasing marketing of fur accessories and clothing and footwear with fur trim (e.g. as collars, scarves or on hoods) has almost imperceptibly brought fur back onto the streets. Targeting a younger and fashion conscious market, fur is now included in anything from evening wear to sports wear and haute couture to ready-to-wear mass produced affordable garments.

Worldwide fur sales totalled some US\$11 billion in 2001/02. The European Union is the world's biggest consumer of fur, with EU sales having increased sharply since the mid-1990s. EU sales of full fur products and fur trim in 2002/2003 are estimated at US\$4.525 million.

Although fur farming has been banned in the UK, London is the world centre for fur buyers. The 45 members of the British Fur Trade Association or BFTA, itself part of the International Fur Trade Federation (IFTF), represents retailers, traders, wholesalers and manufacturers. Collectively BFTA members buy the majority of the world's fur at primary level, which is to say as pelts. In doing so, they turn over some £500 million a year.

Eighty five percent of the world's fur originates from farms. China, also a member of the IFTF, is the world's largest exporter of fur clothing and according to industry sources, the biggest fur trade production and processing base in the world. Between 25% and 30% of the country's fur is obtained from wild animals, while 70-75% originate from captive animals. China is also one of the few countries in the world without any legal provisions for animal welfare.

Most Chinese fur farms were established during the past ten years. Wild species bred for fur include red and Arctic foxes, raccoon dogs, mink, and Rex rabbits. According to Chinese fur industry sources, a growing number of international fur traders, processors and fashion designers have gradually shifted their business to China, where cheap labour and the absence of restrictive regulations make life easier and profit margins broader.

The international fur sector is complex, with pelts produced by farmers passing through several countries and undergoing various processes before it reaches the final consumer.

Chinese Customs statistics indicate a net volume of fur imports and exports for 2003 of US\$997.6 million, up 42.5% from 2002. More than 95% of fur clothing produced in China is sold to overseas markets, with 80% of fur exports from Hong Kong destined for Europe, the USA and Japan. The country's expanding product range includes pelts, full coats, fur accessories, such as scarves and hats etc., toys, garment trimmings and even furniture. A random market survey in boutiques and department stores in Switzerland and London discovered fur garments labelled "Made in China" among top fashion brands.

In the UK, fur farming has been banned on humanitarian grounds. In all farms visited in China, animals were handled roughly and were confined to rows of inappropriate, small wire cages, which fall way short of EU regulations. Signs of extreme anxiety and pathological behaviours were prominent throughout. Other indicators of poor welfare include high cub mortality, self-mutilation and infanticide.

Between November and December, foxes are sold, slaughtered, skinned and their fur is processed. Animals are often slaughtered adjacent to wholesale markets, where farmers bring their animals for trade and large companies come to buy stocks. To get there, animals are often transported over large distances and under horrendous conditions before being slaughtered. They are stunned with repeated blows to the head or swung against the ground. Skinning begins with a knife at the rear of the belly whilst the animal is lying on its back or hung up-side-down by its hind legs from a hook. A significant number of animals remain fully conscious during this process. Helpless, they struggle and try to defend themselves to the very end. Even after their skin has been stripped off, breathing, heart beat, directional body and eyelid movements were evident for 5 to 10 minutes.

This report shows that China's colossal fur industry routinely subjects animals to housing, husbandry, transport and slaughter practices that are unacceptable from a veterinary, animal welfare and moral point of view. Housing, husbandry, transport and slaughter conditions fall drastically short of EU, UK and Swiss legislation.

We therefore urgently appeal to:

- Fashion designers to shun the use of fur in their collections and use non-violent materials instead
- Shoppers not to buy fur garments or accessories or clothes with fur trimmings
- Shoppers to check whether designers incorporate fur in their collections
- Fashion retailers not to stock garments or accessories or clothes with fur trimmings
- EU member states and the European Parliament to ban the import of fur from China and of garments that contain such fur
- Chinese government to urgently introduce and enforce legislation prohibiting the skinning of live animals
- Chinese government to urgently introduce and enforce legislation prohibiting inhumane treatment and slaughter methods
- Chinese government to introduce and enforce legislation prohibiting the inhumane confinement of animals

1. Introduction



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“Fur is back. For good. Previously a luxury, it’s everywhere this winter.”

Elle France, 2 December 2002

"Real Fur Is Fun Again", extols the headline of a recent article in the magazine Newsweek.¹ This is music to the ears of fur industry representatives. For about a decade they have waged a coordinated, well funded and slick global PR campaign aimed at dispelling the moral stigma attached to wearing fur. Together with its national members, the International Fur Trade Federation (IFTF) has been working overtime courting top designers, fashion houses and women's magazines, tempting fashion students with fur fashion design competitions and targeting a much broader range of potential consumers with inventive spin about freedom of choice and independent thinking. And it has paid off. Mixing fur with silk, wool, suede and leather, new manufacturing processes such as shearing and knitting, as well as fashionable new colours, have added novelty and versatility to fur. Steadily increasing marketing of fur accessories and clothing and footwear with fur trim (e.g. as collars, scarves or on hoods) has almost imperceptibly brought fur back onto the streets. From evening wear to sports wear and haute couture to ready-to-wear mass produced affordable garments; fur has made a fashionable come back. According to the Fur Commission USA, "once again for 2003/2004 retailers reported that the average age of the fur buyer continues to decline with 55.3% of today's fur customers

under the age of 44."² Those who still can't help wondering about the animals whose skin has become a trendy wardrobe filler are offered assurances. "Farming and wearing fur harms nobody" says Richard D. North of the Institute of Economic Affairs.³ Fur, we are to believe, is not only hip and luxurious, sexy and fun, it stems from well cared for, purpose bred, happy animals who lead contented lives on fur "farms" and "ranches". When their time comes they are humanely 'harvested' or "euthanased" to provide today's young, intelligent, professional woman, who knows what she wants, with stylish "city chic".

Founded in 1949, the International Fur Trade Federation (IFTF) is today comprised of 35 member associations and organisations from 29 countries. It claims to include practically every fur producer and fur consuming country in the world.⁴ According to information posted on the internet, the IFTF seeks to protect fur trade interests, promote innovation, high standards and a positive factual image of fur and the fur industry worldwide whilst, at the same time, being "dedicated to the conservation and welfare of all fur-bearing animals".⁵

Worldwide fur sales totalled some US\$11 billion in 2001/02.⁶ Perhaps surprisingly, the European Union is the world's biggest consumer of fur, with EU sales increasing sharply since the mid-1990s. Sales of full fur products and fur trim in 2002/2003 are estimated at US\$4.525 million.⁷ A staggering 35.5 million pelts were produced in 2002.⁸ In the same year, 40,000 fur sector enterprises were based in the EU.⁷



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It may also come as a surprise that, while fur farming has been banned in the UK, London is the world centre for fur buyers.⁹ Part of the IFTF, the 45 members of the British Fur Trade Association, or BFTA, represent retailers, traders, wholesalers and manufacturers. Collectively, BFTA members buy the majority of the world's fur at primary level, which is to say as pelts. In doing so, they turn over some £500 million a year.¹⁰ By the 1999/2000 season, UK sales of fur including fur trims had increased tenfold compared to 1985.¹¹ UK industry figures report a 35% rise in sales of fur, fur trim and fur accessories from 2002 to 2003.¹² Isabel Oakeshott, Political Correspondent for the Evening Standard, noted that "More than £40 million of fur-related items poured into Britain last year - almost double the amount of five years ago. Imports of clothes and fashion accessories made with real fur have tripled from £4 million to about £12 million in the past decade. As well as fur clothes, more than £6 million of raw fur and £22 million of tanned or dressed fur, from 12 named species and 'other animals', was shipped into Britain last year."¹³

Eighty five percent of the world's fur originates from farms.¹⁴ China, also a member of the IFTF, is the world's largest exporter of fur clothing and according to industry sources, the biggest fur trade production and processing base in the world.⁸ It is

also a country without any legal provisions for animal welfare and a correspondingly poor track record. So we set out to examine the situation on the ground. What we found has shocked even the most seasoned campaigners. Our investigators uncovered and documented unimaginable acts of systematic brutality and animal cruelty on a colossal scale, which are the subject of this report.

This is the first ever report from inside China's fur farms. Based on field and desk research carried out in 2004 and January 2005, it provides background information on the Chinese fur industry and describes and documents husbandry and slaughter practices. The report goes on to place China's role as the world's largest exporter of fur garments into a global context, which involves direct links to the EU and the UK. It ends in a set of urgent recommendations for national and international policy makers, as well as members of the British and European public. The report focuses on Hebei Province, one of China's major fur trade centres. However, the conditions encountered there are representative of fur farming operations throughout China. A comprehensive selection of photographs and video footage is available from Care for the Wild International (© Swiss Animal Protection/EAST International).

2. Fur Farming in China

A Finnish fur industry report recently pointed out the difficulties of obtaining accurate fur trade statistics for China.¹⁵ It concluded that, whilst a detailed assessment of China's fur industry is therefore impossible, there is no doubt that China has become the biggest fur trade production and processing base in the world.

Most Chinese fur farms were established during the past ten years. Species bred for fur include red and Arctic foxes, raccoon dogs, mink, and Rex rabbits. According to Chinese fur industry sources, a growing number of international fur traders, processors and fashion designers have gradually shifted their business to China, where cheap labour and the absence of restrictive welfare regulations make life easier and profit margins wider. According to a Korean fox farmer, Canada tried to exploit cheap labour in China and in the early 1990s exported 200 breeding foxes there.¹⁶



Chinese Fur Trade Association statistics state that between 25% and 30% of the country's fur is obtained from wild animals, while 70-75% originates from captive animals. Fur markets and trade centres continue to mushroom, accompanied by an upsurge of companies dealing in all manner of fur, pelts, trimmings, garments and other relevant products and services. One major wholesale and retail market was reportedly involved in trading more than 1,800,000 fur coats, 1,500,000 pieces of pelt and 2,000,000 trimmings in 2000 alone¹⁷ - the equivalent of nearly US\$200,000,000 and only a fraction of the overall volume of fur traded in China.

Commercial fox farming in China began in 1860. As fur farming expanded into a major industry in the West, China began to follow suit by the mid 1950s. From 1956, breeding foxes for fur became more widespread. At the time, some 200,000 foxes were added to the country's fur farms each year. Collectively they churned out more than a million skins a year. As China began to open up commercially between the 1980s and 90s, the country's fur industry boomed. Next to traditional state-run farms, private and family run farms started to spring up. During the 1990s, the sector attracted foreign investments, which lead to the establishment of even more fur farms. To date, Chinese fur farmers hold more than 1.5 million foxes and an estimated equal number of raccoon dogs.⁴

3. Major Farming Areas

According to Chinese industry sources, fur farms in Shandong Province, situated in the country's North-East, hold the highest number of animals, including more than 500,000 foxes. Next up is Heilongjiang Province, where over 300,000 foxes are held for their fur. The number of foxes on farms in Jilin Province too exceeds the 300,000 mark and continues to rise.¹⁸

While fur farms are also present in Hebei Province, this part of China primarily acts as one of the country's main hubs for wholesale and retail markets. Some of the animals bred in Shangdong Province are sold and transported to Hebei to be slaughtered and skinned. Liou Shih in Li County and Shan Cuen in Su Lian County, both in Hebei Province, are China's biggest fur wholesale and retail markets.¹⁹ Liou Shih market deals mainly in raw cow hides and sheep skins, commonly known as "rough fur", while the market in Shan Cuen specialises in mink, fox, Rex rabbits and raccoon dog skins, collectively referred to as "fine fur".



4. Scale of Farming Operations

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Small fur farms are often run as family businesses. Mid size farms retain between 10 and 15 workers, while larger facilities employ from fifty to several hundred workers. Farms and fur trade related businesses in Shangdon and Heilongjiang Provinces are the biggest and most efficient in China. With animal numbers ranging from 1,000 to more than 10,000 per farm, many have been the recipients of overseas investments. One of the largest farms holds more than 15,000 foxes and 6,000 mink.²⁰ Operating as a multi-functional enterprise, it incorporates artificial insemination, breeding, slaughtering, pelt-processing, tanning, and post-production facilities. It is also engaged in export to other countries.

In Hebei Province, many fox farms have set up shop in the vicinity of cities and towns such as Tanshang City, Laoting County, Li County and Bao Shu City. The majority of these farms are run by private individuals. Animals generally number from under one hundred to several hundreds. The biggest farm in this province holds more than 20,000 animals.²¹ Smaller farms focus mainly on breeding and then sell their foxes to wholesale markets or slaughter houses. Skins are then passed to the next tier of fur traders and processors for further treatment and post-production.

Several farms in Hebei Province were visited as part of the field research for this report. Numbers of animals held at these facilities ranged from 50 to 6000. Some farms mainly keep foxes, but the majority also hold other species such as mink, raccoon dogs, and Rex rabbits.

Fox species commonly kept include different colour morphs of Arctic (*Alopex lagopus*) (white and blue fox) and red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) (red and silver fox). Fur farmers are said to mostly use artificial insemination to crossbreed blue and silver foxes, as their natural mating periods do not coincide. Industry figures estimate that China produces over 1 million mink and fox skins each year – the equivalent of 11% of the world's mink and 27% of the world's fox production⁷.

Many farms are facing inbreeding related problems, which lead to a gradual deterioration of fur quality. One farmer claimed that, as a result, Chinese farmers import fresh blue fox breeding stock from Finland to improve the quality of their pelts. According to a Finnish television report, Finland exported two million animals to fur farms in China in May 1998.¹⁶ Heilongjiang Province has also seen the establishment of a fox farm that specialises solely in breeding. One farm owner stated that similar enterprises are soon to be initiated in Hebei as well. Other fur related business ventures include selling Finnish blue fox sperm and instruction in artificial insemination techniques.

5. Products and Prices

The Chinese fur industry's expanding product range includes pelts, full coats, accessories, such as scarves and hats etc., as well as garment trimmings, combination garments, toys and even furniture.

Shop workers explained that price depends on the design and size of a garment as well as the amount, species and quality of the fur used. Almost all shops keepers maintained that their furs were imported from the USA or Finland. This reflects the widely held belief that domestically produced fur has yet to meet top quality standards. Locally produced fur is therefore intentionally mislabelled with foreign manufacturer's marks to achieve higher prices.

Live foxes are sold for between US\$50 - 75 per individual. However, the price of live animals and pelts varies from year to year. Chinese department stores typically sell a good fur coat for between US\$3,750 to US\$5,000, while some top of the range coats retail for as much as US\$12,500. Prices at retail and market stalls are lower, ranging from US\$1,250 to US\$2,500.



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6. Export

The international fur sector is complex, with pelts produced by farmers passing through several countries and undergoing various processes before reaching the final consumer.⁷ The IFTF recognises China as the world's largest exporter of fur. More than 95% of fur clothing produced in China is sold to overseas markets, including Europe, the

USA, Japan, Korea and Russia, with 80% of fur exports from Hong Kong destined for Europe, the USA and Japan. Products include fur, fur garments and fabric or leather garments with fur trim. Chinese Customs statistics indicate a net volume of fur imports and exports of US\$997.6 million in 2003, up 42.5% from 2002²². China has also become the leading fur garment exporter to the USA, accounting for 40% of total US fur imports in 2004 – the equivalent of US\$7.9 million.²³ Exact export statistics, however, are difficult to obtain, as fur trimmings are not specifically declared to customs. Furthermore, retailers can import stock which is then re-exported to another country.

Most retailers are unwilling to declare the true origin of their garments in an effort to avoid the image of cheap production and inferior quality. Any fashion retailer can legally import textiles from China without having to declare their origin. If it is mentioned at all, the final label may only read “Made in Italy” or “Made in France”, for example. Most retailers do not even identify the type of fur used for trimmings. However a random market survey in boutiques and department stores in Switzerland and London discovered fur garments labelled “Made in China” among top fashion brands.

Internationally, the overall economic importance of the classic furrier has become greatly diminished during the past ten years. In many countries, their relative contribution to revenue generated from fur garment sales has become all but irrelevant. In January 2005, the Sandy Parker report stated that “traditional furriers must recognise that a share of at least their potential market has now been taken away by non-fur retailers. Thus, while their own sales may have remained steady or increased marginally, furs sold by department and speciality stores, including boutiques, are up substantially and may account for the bulk of the increases that were registered in the past two years. Similarly, any decline in sales by fur stores and departments may not necessarily signify a general decline in demand for fur, but possibly that fur customers are finding what they want elsewhere.”²⁴

7. On the Farm

Red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) weigh 5.2-5.9kg with a head-body length of 66–68cm. Arctic foxes (*Alopex lagopus*) have a head-body length of 53-55cm and an average body weight of 3.1-3.8kg. Raccoon dogs (*Nyctereutes procyonoides*), an Asian fox-like canid, weigh between 2.5 and 6.25kg with an average body length of 56.7cm in Japan, and 51.5-70.5cm and 3.1-12.4kg for Finnish raccoon dogs.²⁵

On Chinese fur farms, foxes and raccoon dogs are confined in rows of wire mesh cages (3.5 x 4cm mesh) measuring around 90(L) x 70(W) x 60(H) cm, although some are far smaller. The cages are raised off the ground by 40–50cm, contain no furnishings, nest boxes, and in many cases, no cover. Each cage houses one or two animals. Cages housing breeding females link to brick enclosures intended to offer females a degree of seclusion during birth and cub rearing to reduce cub mortality, e.g. through infanticide or maternal neglect.

Mating takes place from January to April. The majority of farms use artificial insemination, especially to cross-breed blue and silver foxes, whose mating periods do not coincide. Foxes reach sexual maturity after 10-11 months. Breeding animals are used for five to seven years. Farm owners state that vixens produce average litters of 10-15 cubs a year between May and June.¹ Cubs are born in spring and weaned after three months. According to farm owners, average cub survival rate is 50% to weaning. This means that farmers gain around five to seven cubs per litter. Cubs are usually slaughtered after a further six months, once they have undergone their first winter moult. Farmers retain some animals as breeding stock, but most animals are sold at the end of each year.



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“Fur farming is well regulated and operates within the highest standards of care.”

International Fur Trade Federation⁸



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Pathological behaviours, which indicate significant welfare problems, such as extreme stereotypic behaviourⁱⁱ, severe fearfulness, learned helplessness (unresponsiveness and extreme inactivity) and self mutilation, were observed on all farms. Farmers also reported breeding difficulties and infanticide, which have also been associated with poor welfare in these and other species. Farmers handle foxes by first removing them from their cage with iron tongs that clamp around the neck and then grabbing them by the tail. Two types of tongs are used. Subsequent handling usually involves holding the animals upside down by their hind legs.

The rearing season extends from June to December. Once animals are selected for fur production as opposed to breeding, the quality of their fur is the farmers’ sole concern. Before animals are ready for slaughter, farmers examine the maturity and quality of their fur. Between November and December, foxes are sold, slaughtered, skinned and their fur is processed.

¹ It is assumed that this figure refers to average litter sizes across the two fox species, including crossbreeds, as well as raccoon dogs.

ⁱⁱ Stereotypies are repetitive, invariant behaviour patterns that serve no apparent function.⁴⁶ These behaviours are frequently seen in captive animals, particularly those housed in sterile, restrictive environments, and in carnivores typically take the form of pacing back and forth.

8. Slaughter

Animals are slaughtered adjacent to wholesale markets, where farmers bring their animals for sale and large companies come to buy stock. To get there, animals are often transported over large distances and under terrible conditions before being slaughtered.



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“Farming and wearing fur harms nobody.”

Richard D North, Institute of Economic Affairs, quoted by British Fur Trade Association³

Workers extract animals from their cages using a capture pole with a noose at the end. Sometimes the animals are held suspended by their necks for some time and carried around. Workers then grab the animal by its hind legs and, using a metal or wooden stick, repeatedly strike the fox, raccoon dog or mink on the head. Alternatively, they may swing it head-first against the ground. These actions are intended to stun the animal. The animals struggle or convulse and lie trembling or barely moving on the ground. The worker then stands by to watch whether the animal remains more or less immobile.

Many, whilst immobile, remain alive. Skinning begins with a knife at the rear of the belly whilst the animal lies on its back or is hung upside-down by its hind legs from a hook. In one case, this took place next to a truck which collected the carcasses - for human consumption. Starting from the hind legs, workers then wrench the animal's skin from its suspended body, until it comes off over the head. We were able to observe and document that a significant number of animals remain fully conscious during the skinning process and started to writhe and move around. Workers used the handle of the knife to beat the animals' head repeatedly until they became motionless once again. Other workers stepped on the animal's head or neck to strangle it or hold it down. Animals that had not been fully stunned or regained consciousness during skinning struggled helplessly, trying to defend themselves to the very end. Even after their skin has been stripped off, breathing, heartbeat, directional body and eyelid movements were evident for up to 5 to 10 minutes.

9. Fur Processing

China is the world's leading producer of fur garments. Added to its domestic production of fur, China imports five million mink pelts and 1.5 million fox pelts each year.²² This amounts to 40% of the world's fur auction house transactions. Many of these pelts are dyed in China before being re-exported as fashionably coloured fur trimmings.

In 2002/03, 40% of fox pelts produced in Finland (845,325) were exported to China and Hong Kong. Thirty-eight percent of Finland's mink production too was exported to China – the equivalent of 1,633,682 pelts.²⁶ The sheer scale in numbers of animals killed in and around the major fur processing centres poses a considerable environmental burden. Enormous amounts of blood and offal accumulate in these open-air slaughter facilities. The same applies to tanneries, where dangerous chemicals, including chromium, represent an additional health and environmental hazard. According to Professor Cheng Fengxia of Shaanxi University of Science and Technology, “*Pollution caused by inappropriate processing, especially colouring the fur, has become a headache.*”²² At markets in Haining in Zhejiang Province for example, nearly 100,000 pelts are traded each and every day. They are then treated, processed, coloured, trimmed or woven to match the fashion tastes of the day.



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10. Welfare

The past two and a half decades have seen the emergence of a robust new scientific discipline: Animal Welfare Science. Multidisciplinary by nature, it incorporates veterinary and behavioural science, physiology, wildlife biology, immunology, neurobiology and endocrinology. These developments have not only sparked the advent of scientific journals such as *Animal Welfare* and the *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, but the creation of a growing number of university departments and degree courses dedicated to this topic. The following section provides a brief introduction to the rationale of this discipline and is intended to serve as a context for subsequent discussions.

What is Animal Welfare?

Every living organism is affected by its environment. Individuals must constantly adjust to favourable or unfavourable physical or psychological conditions. Depending on the intensity and/or nature of a stimulus, animals (and humans) will either adapt easily, with difficulty, or not at all. In order to understand and assess environmental effects on animals, we must examine *“the state of an individual as regards its attempts to cope with its environment, the extent to which coping attempts are successful, and the effort invested in coping”* – together they describe an animal’s welfare.²⁷ It is important to understand that animal welfare, like health, is an innate quality of the individual, not an externally attributed characteristic.²⁸ Like health, which forms part of welfare, welfare can be affected by genetic make-up, prior experience, gender, age and environmental circumstances.²⁷ In each individual and at any given time, welfare, like health, ranges from good to poor along a continuous scale. This scale includes an optimal and a tolerable range, beyond which lies pathology.

Some environmental stimuli are so intense, prolonged or frequent that it is impossible for animals to adapt.²⁹⁻³³ Such conditions harm biological function and lead to physiological and/or behavioural pathology.³⁴⁻³⁶ Individuals experiencing such conditions are suffering from biological stress and poor welfare.^{28, 31} In this state, a variety of interrelated physiological, metabolic, endocrinological, neurological and behavioural processes, are affected, which in turn can impair immune function, reproduction, growth and longevity.³⁶⁻³⁸ Qualitative and quantitative changes in these parameters are used in the scientific assessment of animal welfare. Therefore, welfare is likely to be poor if animals die prematurely, fail to reproduce, show increased disease susceptibility, exhibit certain hormonal or metabolic changes, or display particular pathological behaviour patterns.

Health and Welfare in Chinese Fur Farms

The evidence presented in this report shows that China’s colossal fur industry routinely subjects animals to housing, husbandry, transport and slaughter practices that are unacceptable from a veterinary, animal welfare and moral perspective.

Animals were universally handled roughly and confined to rows of inappropriate, small wire cages, in all farms, Markets and slaughter facilities visited. Signs of extreme anxiety and pathological behaviours were prominent throughout. Other obvious indicators of poor welfare include high cub mortality, self-mutilation and infanticide. Slaughter procedures too were grossly inhumane, forcing millions of animals to endure a drawn out, violent, inconceivably painful and distressing death.

China is the biggest fur trade production and processing base in the world.¹⁵ Each year unimaginable numbers of animals are forced through Chinese fur farms and slaughter houses for the sake of their skins. Yet, China is still without any legal provisions for animal welfare. The most recent initiatives to address this legislative vacuum were shelved last year.

Behavioural Problems and Captivity

When individuals are placed into artificial environments, both the complexity and amount of their physical surroundings are dramatically reduced. In addition, captive animals are forced to tolerate and closely interact with humans, who control every aspect of their daily lives.³⁹ In the wild, animals can control stimulus loads by making behavioural adjustments, such as approach, attack, chase, explore, avoid or hide. In a dramatic ‘reality shift’, these coping strategies are no longer available in most captive situations.^{39, 40} Lack of control and exposure to inescapable adversity is recognised as profoundly damaging, and it has therefore been argued that many chronic stressors are unique to captive environments.

Professor Donald Broom, of the Veterinary Department of the University of Cambridge, argues that behavioural abnormalities are best suited for the detection of chronic welfare problems.³¹ Where they occur they are usually associated with the absence of ‘resources’ the animal requires and the accompanying frustration. This can mean anything from access to more space, a more stimulating or quiet or environment, the ability to perform certain behaviours and access to social or sexual partners.³²



“It is a fact that fur farming and good welfare go hand in hand.”

British Fur Trade Association¹¹



“I don’t think that China needs any legislation concerning fur animals... in China we trust the Finnish ability and know-how of how to farm foxes because Finns have bred fur animals over 1,000 years.”

A Chinese fur farmer¹⁶

In Chinese fur farms, foxes, raccoon dogs, mink and rabbits are confined to cramped wire mesh cages. European guidelines stated in the Council of Europe's 'Standing Committee of the European Convention for the Protection of Animals Kept for Farming Purposes: Recommendation Concerning Fur Animals'⁴¹ stipulate a minimum cage area for foxes on fur farms of 0.8m² or 8000cm². Some of the larger cages holding foxes and raccoon dogs in China measured around 90 x 70cm, the equivalent of 0.63m² or 6300cm². Thus, even in the larger cages, foxes and raccoon dogs have a third less floor space and 14% (10cm) less cage height than *minimum* EC recommendations.



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“Fur farmers have a vested interest in keeping their animals healthy and content.”

International Fur Trade Federation⁸

Farmed foxes are known to suffer from extreme fear,⁴²⁻⁴⁴ which is exacerbated by close proximity of humans, frequent and rough handling, inability to withdraw and crowded housing near other foxes. According to Council of Europe recommendations, foxes should therefore be supplied with year-round nest boxes.⁴¹ However, in addition to being confined in unsuitably small cages, foxes on Chinese fur farms have been denied this. Fear has been linked to physiological stress, the development of abnormal behaviours (see below), infanticide in nursing mothers and - not surprisingly - poor welfare. All are widespread on Chinese fur farms, as are signs of self-mutilation. In addition to excessive fear, research has identified the barrenness of cages and impaired reproduction as major problems associated with fox farming. Their presence too, has therefore been linked with poor welfare in this species. In recognition of these factors, several European countries have banned or severely restricted fox farming. EU recommendations also stipulate that *“until there is sufficient information on the welfare of raccoon dogs, keeping of this species on fur farms should be discouraged.”*⁴⁴

Caged animals often perform repetitive, invariant behaviour patterns that serve no apparent function. They are collectively known as *stereotypies*.⁴⁶ These behaviours are frequently seen in captive animals, and in carnivores typically take the form of pacing back and forth. In some cases, pacing may be accompanied by, or consist solely of other repetitive movements, such as a nodding or circling of the head – a common sight in farmed mink.

Stereotypies have been associated with poor welfare in captive animals for more than five decades, since they tend to develop in conditions that have been identified as stressful and aversive.^{31, 47, 48} Based on scientific evidence, such situations include restrictive environments, lack of stimulation and unavoidable fear or frustration.⁴⁶ They are particularly common in inappropriate sterile and restrictive housing conditions^{49, 50} and often occur where animals have been unable to extract themselves from stressful situations.⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸ Scientific research on this topic has led to stereotypic behaviour being used as an indicator of poor welfare and coping difficulties in both human and nonhuman animals.^{31, 46} Therefore, *“any individual showing them has a problem.”*³¹



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“Only good animal welfare is acceptable for fur farmed animals and this should be the basis of all animal husbandry legislation.”

British Fur Trade Association¹⁴

During her research at Oxford University, Dr Ros Clubb, who recently joined Care for the Wild International's Project Team, found that the greater the constraint on natural behaviour in captivity, the more stereotypies and other signs of poor welfare are shown by captive carnivores. Species that usually travel great distances in the wild show the highest levels of stereotypy and infant mortality compared to species that hold smaller natural territories in the wild. Part of Dr Clubb's work involved investigating the stereotypies of animals farmed for their fur, including mink and foxes. The few studies that exist on the stereotypies of farmed foxes show the behaviour to be infrequent, occupying on average less than 1% of the animals' time.^{44, 53} Observations and video footage of foxes confined in Chinese fur farms show extreme levels of stereotypic behaviour, indicating that the animals' housing conditions are grossly inadequate and result in serious welfare problems.

Foxes on Chinese fur farms were often inactive and apathetic, often huddling in the back of their cages. Ongoing uncontrollable aversive stimulation can lead to a behavioural response termed *'learned helplessness'*⁵⁴, which at first glance can appear similar to habituation.⁵⁵ However, the behavioural sign of 'giving up' in the face of uncontrollable aversive conditions is linked to profound physiological effects⁵⁶ associated with poor welfare.

Fur Quality

In one of its perennial arguments in defence of fur farming, the industry claims that fur quality is a sure fire indicator that animals are well cared for. Statements like, *“It is a fact that fur farming and good welfare go hand in hand”*²² may

sound sensible, but it's not that simple. Foxes and mink are killed after their first winter moult, when their coat is in prime condition. Years of selective breeding for fur quality have produced animals whose fur quality is less sensitive to welfare conditions than, say that of companion animals. In its report on the welfare of animals farmed for fur, the Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare of the European Commission (p73) states: *"fur clarity and density do not correlate with any other welfare measure. Thus, except in extreme cases indicative of pre-clinical or clinical conditions, or cases of pelt biting, considered below, mink pelt condition is probably best considered a production measure rather than a sensitive welfare measure."*⁴⁴

Cub Mortality

Infanticide is a familiar problem on fox farms. According to fur farm owners in China, average cub mortality to weaning is 50%. This is exceptionally high even for foxes on farms. In Sweden an estimated 15–30% of fox cubs die before weaning and in Finland, the fur trade magazine 'Turkistalous' mentions an estimated 30% mortality in 1990.⁵⁷ A Norwegian study referred to by the European Commission in its report 'The Welfare of Animals kept for Fur Production', describes cub mortality levels of 16.8% for silver foxes and 22% for red foxes.⁵⁸

Artificial Insemination

Artificial insemination is common on fur farms, including those in China. In Finland, the use of artificial insemination has given rise to welfare concerns, which fur farm workers have reportedly conveyed to the Finnish animal protection organisation, Animalia.¹⁶ Artificial insemination is said to be used mostly to crossbreed blue and silver foxes, whose natural mating periods do not overlap. According to this source, *"precise timing is needed if the female is not to be hurt. If heat detectors and insemination devices are used too early, injuries result. Too high a voltage in the heat detection device causes convulsions. Lack of hygiene and ripping of membranes are reported to have resulted in thousands of deaths. Sperm collection is an unpleasant procedure with foxes struggling to get away and damaging their teeth on tongs. The same donor can be used several times a week."*⁵⁷

Transport

Welfare problems associated with transporting domestic or wild animals are numerous.³² Transport is known to be stressful. This fact is acknowledged even by the international fur industry.⁵⁹ Yet, in China, animals are frequently transported to markets, where they are slaughtered, over considerable distances and under appalling conditions.



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Slaughter

The evidence that animals feel pain and seek to avoid it is overwhelming.⁶⁰⁻⁶³ The body's nociceptive system is responsible for pain perception. It includes anatomical, physiological and biochemical elements, such as receptors, neuronal pathways and uses specific transmitter substances, which are present in most animals, including man.⁶⁴⁻⁶⁶ All vertebrates have such a system, which varies little from one mammalian species to another, and invertebrates have some components of it. Such evidence *"suggests strongly that pain can be experienced by all animals."*²⁸ Recent experimental research on several mammalian species (including man) has confirmed that the pain thresholds for thermal stimuli and pressure are approximately the same for all species examined.^{67, 68} However, phylogenetic distance from our own species can affect our ability to interpret an animal's response to pain.^{28, 69}

Slaughter practices used on animals farmed for fur in China involved extremely rough handling and stunning or attempts to stun the animals with repeated blows to the head or by being flung head first against the ground. Following this treatment animals were often left next to, or piled on top of each other. Some animals may have been dead, others stunned. Clearly injured, many were convulsing, trembling or trying to crawl away. Workers made no attempts to ensure that animals were dead before skinning. In other cases animals regained consciousness as their skin was being removed. Workers then used the handle of their knife to beat the animals' head repeatedly until they became motionless once again. Others simply stepped on the animals' head or neck to strangle it or hold it down. Desperate and writhing in agony, animals conscious during these procedures hopelessly tried to defend themselves even to the point where all their skin had been forced off. Even so, breathing, heart beat, directional body and eyelid movements were evident for 5 to 10 minutes.



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Regulations and scientific discussions of killing methods for animals held in fur farm generally refer to methods such as gassing, lethal injection and electrocution. ^{e.g. 41, 42, 44} None anticipated having to address recommendations on animals being clubbed, choked or skinned to death.

Because animals can experience pain and fear, inflicting them has moral implications. Regulations and technical discussions of slaughter practices that take at least some account of what science has to say on these matters, emphasise the importance of minimising pain and distress.

Article 22 of the Council of Europe Standing Committee of the European Convention for the Protection of Animals Kept for Farming Purposes (T-AP)'s 1999 recommendation concerning fur animals states that:

1. Killing shall be done by a competent person without causing undue agitation, pain or other forms of distress. The method chosen shall either:
 - a. cause immediate loss of consciousness and death, or
 - b. rapidly induce deep general anaesthesia culminating in death, or
 - c. cause the death of an animal which is anaesthetised or effectively stunned without any aversive influence on the animal.

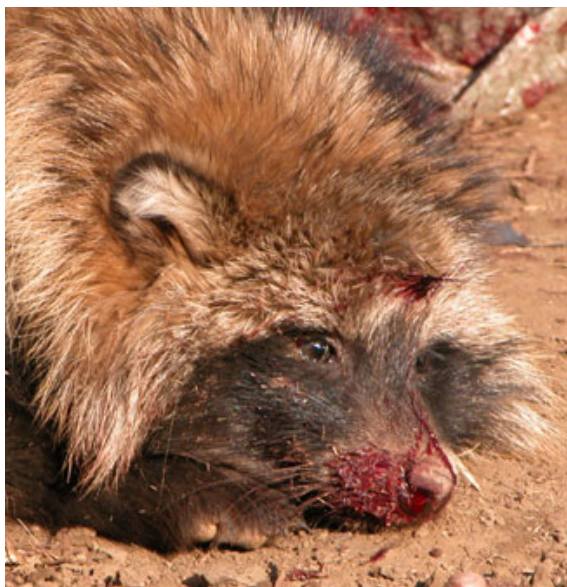
Appendix F lists the principal methods which can, when used correctly, meet these requirements and which should be applied when permitted under domestic law and in accordance with domestic law.

2. The person responsible for the killing shall ensure that for each animal the requirements under paragraph 1 above are fulfilled, and that the animal is dead before further procedures are carried out.
3. Killing shall be done so as to cause the least possible disturbance to the other animals.

The slaughter methods furbearing animals are subjected to in China fail to meet, or come close to meeting, any of these provisions. Instead, the lives of millions of animals held captive in Chinese fur farms are characterised by extraordinary and chronic suffering, before being terminated in the most violent and agonising deaths.

11. Conclusions

Conditions on Chinese fur farms make a mockery of the most elementary animal welfare standards. In their lives and their unspeakable deaths, these animals have been denied even the most simple acts of kindness. Instead, millions of individuals are forced to endure the most profound indifference to their suffering, dignity and most basic needs – in the name of fashion. This report shows that China's colossal fur industry routinely subjects animals to housing, husbandry, transport and slaughter practices that are unacceptable from a veterinary, animal welfare and moral point of view.



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Animals are killed “very quickly (counted in seconds) and without pain.”

International Fur Trade Federation ⁸

According to industry sources, fur has re-established its position in the fashion world. Reportedly, more than 350 leading international fashion designers now include fur in their collections. With ever growing product ranges, manufacturing methods and colour selections, the International Fur Trade Federation (IFTF) and its national member organisations have done a good job peddling fur to the mass market as fashion ‘must-haves’. Many shoppers, who might flinch at buying a full length fur coat, might still be seduced by a coat with a fur collar, a parka with fur trim around the hood, a scarf, or wrap, or a handbag with fur detail. Alternatively, the animal connection may be less apparent with fur that has been shaved, knitted or dyed, or combined with other materials. No longer regarded purely as a luxury product, fur today is mass produced and ‘affordable’. But at what cost? Fur trim may not seem so bad, but fur is fur, and in order to put it on a garment an animal has to die – and as we have seen, that death isn't always easy. Neither was it's life. The international fur industry, of which China is an integral part, is working to a fallacy. To borrow the words of Catherine Aga Khan, “As consumers, let us not be deceived by propaganda which suggests there can be such a thing as “humanely” produced fur”.¹⁶ Let us be clear: the euphemisms espoused by the IFTF are designed to hide the hideous truth about the horror that is the life and death of the millions of animals caught up in this nightmare behind a sanitised and glossy world of high fashion and wholesomeness - backed by million dollar PR campaigns.

With fur production, processing and retailing of fur available on international markets increasingly shifting to China, which is part of the IFTF, the issues raised by this report have become something that should concern us all. China is the world's biggest exporter of fur garments; the European Union the world's biggest consumer of fur. It therefore comes as no surprise that a random market survey of boutiques and department stores in Switzerland and London uncovered fur garments labelled "Made in China" among top fashion brands. In the Treaty of Amsterdam, EU member states endorse "*improved protection and respect for the welfare of animals as sentient beings*". Yet, housing conditions, husbandry, transport and slaughter practices fall radically short of EU, UK and Swiss animal welfare regulations.

In 1989, the UK government's welfare advisory body, the Farm Animal Welfare Council, announced its disapproval of mink and fox farming, noting that "*the systems employed ... do not satisfy some of the most basic criteria ... identified for protecting the welfare of farm animals.*"⁷⁰ Ten years later, fur farming was banned in the UK on humanitarian grounds. However British businesses continue to profit from fur on a grand scale. It seems schizophrenic that members of the British Fur Trade Association turn over £500 million a year as the world's largest buyers of pelts, in a country where fur farming has been made illegal to protect fur bearing animals.

Between 10 and 24 foxes and 36 to 65 mink are killed to make a single fur coat, but the vast majority of fox pelts are used for trim. Professor Rev. Andrew Lindzey once said, "*All the ways we exploit animals are terrible, but none of them is more terrible than the living hell we create for animals on fur farms.*"⁷¹ Their beautiful coats, designed to protect them, have become their one-way ticket to this hell. On one of its web pages, the British Fur Trade Association boasts, "*We know that consumers are voting with their feet and wallets as they flock to the shops to buy fur.*"⁷² What we buy changes the world. The fur industry is right. Buying fur is about choice. It is our sincere hope that this report will serve to inform the choices of many potential fur enthusiasts. In defence of fur farming, the international fur industry has appealed to "*Britain's inherent sense of fairness*". In defence of the animals, we would like to do the same.



In view of the findings presented in this report we appeal to:

- Fashion designers to shun the use of fur in their collections and use non-violent materials instead
- Shoppers not to buy fur garments or accessories or clothes with fur trimmings
- Shoppers to check whether designers incorporate fur in their collections
- Fashion retailers not to stock garments or accessories or clothes with fur trimmings
- EU member states and the European Parliament to ban the import of fur from China and of garments that contain such fur
- Chinese government to urgently introduce and enforce legislation prohibiting the skinning of live animals
- Chinese government to urgently introduce and enforce legislation prohibiting inhumane treatment and slaughter methods
- Chinese government to introduce and enforce legislation prohibiting the inhumane confinement of animals

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