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Fur is 'eco-fabulous,' says council

Animal activists outraged by claim

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The debate over fur's sustainability rages on. (Photo by Andrew Stawarz/Flickr)

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VICTORIA (CUP) — The Fur Council of Canada has launched a campaign claiming that animal fur is eco-friendly. But anti-fur advocates are arguing this claim is not only false, but irresponsible.

For Niilo Van Steinburg, founder and co-director of the University of Victoria's Vegan Association, the question of whether fur is environmentally friendly does not even compare to the ethical obligations we have to animals.

"Unnecessary suffering is what we should be preventing," he said. "What we try to do [at the UVA] is put things into the human context. We would not impose harm on humans to help the environment; therefore, we should not impose harm on other sentient creatures."

Everything's gone green

These days it seems as though every marketable and consumable product and service must be green, natural or biodegradable. Consumers often find themselves reaching for the brightest label that reassures them that they are indeed responsible shoppers.

In 2008, the FCC launched their Fur is Green campaign and asked Montreal-based writer Alan Herscovici, who is also the group's executive vice-president, to spearhead the project. His mission was to tell people that animal fur is really a "green" product.

"I thought it was important, at a time when we're all talking about green living, that it was a good time to talk about some of the environmental aspects of the fur trade," said Herscovici.

Today, the FCC's website tells people to "buy fur with confidence." The group's Facebook page says fur is "eco-fabulous." The site offers to educate those who will listen "about the ecological and ethical values of fur."

These claims present a stern challenge to the responsibility of the average consumer. What does "green" really mean? And can the environmental advantages — if they do in fact exist — outweigh the long-running ethical debate surrounding fur?

The great fur debate

The debate over fur is one that has remained relevant since the early '80s when PETA moved to the forefront of media attention with shocking and often gruesome ads slamming the industry. PETA's "I'd Rather Go Naked" ad campaign is still going strong today, featuring supermodels like Cindy Crawford and Kate Moss proudly bearing their bare behinds and telling the world they would rather go naked than wear fur.

In comparison, the FCC website includes a star-studded photo gallery of pro-fur celebrities including Kanye West, Lady Gaga, Naomi Campbell and Victoria Beckham.

Since then, the issue has ranged from discussions over the use of leg-hold traps to the more extreme debate over the use of animal products at all. But rarely, if ever, before has the discussion stepped outside the realm of animal rights issues. The FCC's argument consists of three main points: Fur is sustainable and biodegradable, fur processing does not use petrochemicals, unlike the production of synthetic fibres, and fur is renewable, unlike synthetics.

"Eighty per cent of the clothes we wear in Canada come from synthetics, basically another form of a plastic bag, and we all know how bad plastic bags are for the environment," said Herscovici.

Herscovici is not far off. Synthetics made from petrochemicals do account for a large amount of pollution and can take hundreds of years to breakdown in a landfill. The problem, however, is sorting out whether that pollution comes from synthetic clothing or from the countless other petrochemically processed products — such as products made from plastic — as they all fall under the umbrella pollutant known as petroleum.

What is clear is that synthetic fabrics are made from petroleum, and the production of petroleum is inherently harmful to the environment. What remains to be determined, however, is whether the statement "fur is green" really lives up to its claim.

Making fashion out of fur

"It's such a controversial claim to make," said Kristen Barnes, co-ordinator for the Victoria branch of the B.C. SPCA. "To use the slogan 'Fur is green,'" I mean, obviously that's an attempt to garner attention, and they have to expect that people are going to try and challenge it."

And garner attention it has. Several comments on the Fur is Green website have been left by anti-fur activists, appalled at the FCC's claims and the organization's supporters.

Adrian Nelson of the Association for the Protection of Fur-Bearing Animals also argues against the "fur is green" claim.

"This claim is not substantiated by any third party; it's irresponsible and self-proclaimed," said Nelson. "The fact of the matter is fur is not an environmental choice."

Fur in its natural state — on an animal's body — is 100 per cent biodegradable, says Nelson. However, in order for the pelt to be harvested and used, it must be processed using chemicals and dyes.

"We're talking about the skin of an animal that has to be literally stopped from decomposing," said Nelson. "It takes a harsh amount of chemicals to do that. Formaldehyde, chromium, these things are actually listed as carcinogenic. Fur processing [was] listed as the third most pollutant industry, according to the World Bank [in 1995]."

Processed fur is first pickled in a compound of either potash alum or ammonia and salt, which is then treated with sulphuric acid. Rinsed of this material, the fur goes through a complex process of beating, washing and tanning before it is moved on to the dyeing process. The purpose of dyeing increases the lustre and the value of the fur.

Often furs such as lamb, fox and rabbit are made to better resemble the fur of another animal, usually mink or chinchilla. In this process, a kitchen cupboard's worth of dyes are used to treat the fur: Wood dyes, potassium permanganate, aniline and coal-tar dyes are among those most commonly used.

Nelson says that formaldehyde is also used in toxic quantities in the fur tanning process, but Herscovici disagrees. While the Fur is Green website does state that a small amount of formaldehyde may be used during dyeing, Herscovici says that "the main ingredient in dressing a fur pelt is alum salt."

"What [anti-fur advocates] are referring to when they cite harmful chemicals all has to do with the processing of leather, not fur," Herscovici said.

A matter of definition

The Encyclopaedia of International Labour Organization says that hydrochloric and sulphuric acid, formaldehyde, lead acetate and three-valent chromium — all

potentially toxic and harmful — are chemicals used commonly in a normal fur processing plant.

Chromium has been linked to increases in testicular cancer, and a 1999 study from the New York Department of Health found that nearly 50 per cent of the state's testicular cancer victims worked in the fur-tanning industry.

Fur is Green, however, says the only products used are alum salt, water, sawdust, cornstarch, lanolin and "other natural chemicals."

In 1991, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency warned the public about the potential harm caused by the fecal waste of fur-farmed animals, stating that they "may cause respiratory problems and are listed as possible carcinogens."

Herscovici, however, notes that the warning was released almost 20 years ago, and the fur industry, like all other industries, has come a long way since then.

"The fact of the matter," said Herscovici, "is that fur is an excellent example of the sustainable use of renewable, natural resources, and synthetics are not."

For Barnes and Nelson, the problem is not whether or not synthetics harm the planet; the problem is that the FCC has made the claim that fur is eco-friendly when this remains unclear.

"What the FCC and Fur is Green are doing is playing on people's very real desire to be environmentally conscious and manipulating them with words like 'natural' into thinking that fur is somehow an environmentally friendly choice," said Nelson. "It's so dangerous. It's dangerous and it's scary."

For Nelson, the claim becomes dangerous because we are no longer talking about a bottle of bleach or a plastic bag; we are talking about an issue that runs very deep for a lot of people.

"What kills me the most is that they throw this claim out there without any study or backup and it's so irresponsible," said Nelson. "The majority of consumers, we're not going to do that kind of research, so we take it at face value."

In search of proof

Is there a real answer as to whether fur is eco-friendly, or at least more eco-friendly than synthetics? The exact level of toxins used in processing furs is unclear, as are the pollutant levels of synthetic fibres.

Also unclear is how energy consumption compares between the two. There was one study done at the Ford Motor Company's research facility that showed it took 3.5 times more energy to make a wild-fur coat than a synthetic coat and 15 times more energy to make a farmed-fur coat. That was in 1976.

Since then, there has been no further study on the environmental impact of synthetic or fur products. Some, however, say the level of toxins, pollutants or energy consumption is not, in fact, the issue.

"Whether fur is environmentally friendly or damaging, it really doesn't speak to our ethical obligations towards non-human animals," said Van Steinburg. "One of our biggest concerns environmentally is the overpopulation of humans, yet no one would soundly suggest we impose any harm to humans to combat that."

Van Steinberg points out that synthetic fabrics or fur are not the only options and says we should never be lead to believe that it is one or the other. He suggests recycled and organic-hemp alternatives.

"There's no shortage of options for us in terms of clothing without having to go to these either unethical or environmentally-damaging choices," he said. Other potentially eco-friendly options for clothing include organic wool and cotton.

The reality is that as the popularity of eco-friendly products continues to grow so, too, will the responsibilities of the consumer.