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Fabulous Fashion or Cruel Convention? The Future of the fur trade in the UK

Written on 24 July 2018



Fur coats for many years have been synonymous with high fashion and luxury. Rich, opulent coats and accessories made from fur have been featured prominently in the fashion industry for many years and have been considered highly sort after items.

However, the pressure is mounting on the UK, and for fashion houses and retailers to ban the use and sale of fur in their products. Animal welfare groups argue that the commercial farming of fur produce is cruel and inhumane, and shifting public attitudes have changed the way that many perceive fur produce.

In 2014, A YouGov poll commissioned by animal welfare charity Four Paws found that 74% of respondees said that they thought the use of animals for fur in the fashion industry was wrong. In parliament at the beginning of June this year, MPs called for a ban on the import and sale of fur from the United Kingdom, branding it “vile” (Sir Roger Gale, Con, North Thanet), “Loathsome” (Patricia Gibson, SNP, North Ayrshire and Arran) and the “grimmiest of human activities” (Zac Goldsmith, Con, Richmond Park).

The opposition to the use of fur has also been picked up by a number of prestigious fashion houses

internationally, with big name luxury brands like Versace, Armani, and Gucci introducing a ban on the use of real fur on their clothing and runways. Recent developments such as this will have been seen as a serious blow to the Fur industry in Europe, who specialise in high quality, high value furs for the luxury market. On the high street, London shopping icons like Camden Market have also prohibited the selling of fur.

Despite this however, industry icons like legendary Chanel and Fendi designer, Karl Lagerfeld, have refused to discontinue fur from their collections. When asked about his use of fur and the negative opinions many at organisations such as PETA had for him because of this, in an interview with the New York Times back in 2015, the style icon said “there are not too many people with an opinion I care for.”

Fur industry bodies have fought back too, despite claims by more vocal animal welfare activists, the British Fur Trade Association has said that since 2011, retail sales of fur products in the UK have increased by 350%, and have been picked up much more by young generations of fashion designers and students.

The Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs Select Committee in the UK Parliament launched an inquiry on 7 February 2018 on the future of the fur trade in the UK post leaving the European Union. In evidence given to the committee, Mette Lykke Nielsen, Chief Executive of Fur Europe, the European fur trade and farming association, highlighted the industries willingness for compliance with good animal welfare standards and their use of certification to ensure that fur farmers are raising the meeting the standards set by the European Union. Michael Moser, Chief Executive of the British Fur Trade Association, refuted opinion polls saying that they were flawed, and opposition was based largely on incorrect perception.

The claims of the industry that fur was more popular than it was ten years ago is, even by the same allegedly flawed polls, apparently born out. The most recent YouGov poll from February, revealed 69% of the public were supportive of a ban, lower than the 74% reported in 2014 that considered it “wrong”.

The fur industry and their supporters feel the focus on fur produce is hypocritical. Karl Lagerfeld dismissed campaigners, saying that he did not understand how leather wearing meat eaters could say no to fur coherently. He also warned that the industry, the hunters whose livelihoods was based on trapping would also suffer.

The Committee’s recently published report has called for a public consultation to be held on the possibility of banning the import and sale of fur in the UK. If animal welfare organisations are to be believed, the consultation should show the public to be strongly in favour of a ban, however it remains to be seen yet if the Government consider its remit to include restrictions on clothing.

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