

VEGAN LEATHER EXPLAINED

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The reason why you should choose FAKE over REAL leather

When I started Blanco I received a lot of questions about fake or 'vegan leather'. What is vegan leather? What makes vegan leather more sustainable than real leather? First I will say, the only thing that makes vegan leather 'vegan' is that there are no animals harmed or killed to create it. But leather alternatives can still have a big footprint. That something is vegan does not necessarily mean that it is also sustainable! There are crucial differences in the environmental impact of the different types of vegan leather. Let me break it down for you.

The impact of real leather

The production of leather is not only unethical in regards to animal welfare, it is also very bad for the environment. Here's why:

1. Heavy chemicals are needed for the tanning process and to finish off the leather. These toxins are harmful for people that have to work with them. There is a correlation between leather workers and their life-expectancy, they usually live shorter than their families. Another negative impact of using toxins is that they pollute rivers when unfiltered wastewater is poured into the environment. (Documentary, The true cost, 2015)

2. High energy and water use in the processing of leather.

One ton of hide (skin) generally produces 20 to 80 m³ of wastewater. With solid wastes representing up to 70% of the wet weight of the original hides, the tanning process represents a considerable strain on water treatment installations. (Pulse of the Fashion Industry, Copenhagen Fashion Summit, 2017).

3. Leather plays a huge role in the deforestation of the Amazon. Cattle ranching for the production of meat and leather is the largest driver in deforestation in the Amazon countries, accounting for 80% of current deforestation rates. (Sustainable Material Guide, Modint, 2016)

There is another technique to process real leather in a more natural way, without the use of chromium. This is called vegetable tanning. Even though this process is less harmful for workers and the environment, there are (less) chemicals used and still animals are killed. Regular (chrome) tanning is still the most widely used method (80-95%).

Going for a vegan option is an ethically and environmentally friendly alternative to genuine leather. Synthetic leather has only a third of the environmental impact of cow leather! (Pulse of the Fashion Industry, Copenhagen Fashion Summit, 2017)

Degrees in vegan leather

As I mentioned vegan leather basically means cruelty-free leather and there are still a lot of differences in environmental impact. Keep in mind the following differences. These are the most common leather alternatives from high-impact to low-impact:

1. PVC - the most polluting option is PVC, which contains many harmful chemicals and is petroleum based. During the production process dioxins are produced which are toxic to humans and animals. Dioxins remain in the environment long after PVC is manufactured. When PVC ends up in a landfill it does not decompose like genuine leather and can release dangerous chemicals into the water and soil. Burning it is also not an option, as it then releases even more toxins. All in all, not a sustainable option!

(Sustainable Material Guide, Modint, 2016)

2. PU - Polyurethane is currently more popular than PVC. The manufacturing of PU is cleaner than PVC, but still a lot of chemicals can be used. There is an alternative to conventional PU: water-based PU. It's a chemical story, but the bottom line is that there are less harmful chemicals needed. PU is used as a coating on a backing material to create the leather look effect. Using a recycled polyester as backing also minimizes the impact of the material.

(Sustainable Material Guide, Modint, 2016)

3. New biobased materials - the cleanest leather alternatives are made from natural resources such as cork, pineapples, apples and coffee. These are mostly very new innovations that are developed as a sustainable alternative for leather. Most of these are also circular, which means that are (partly) made from waste.

Most of these materials are so new that they are not yet widely available. Mushroom leather, for example, is not even on the market yet. As this is lab-grown 'leather', it literally needs time to grow before it can be used at a larger scale. A few companies are researching this material and Stella McCartney is one of the main investors who will use it in her collection once the material is developed.

What I want to say is that we should all be more conscious about our consumption. No person or animal should suffer for our enjoyment of looking fabulously fashionable. I hope we can all start thinking about how we want our children to grow up and what kind of footprint we want to leave in the planet.