

Report summary
for citizens



animals

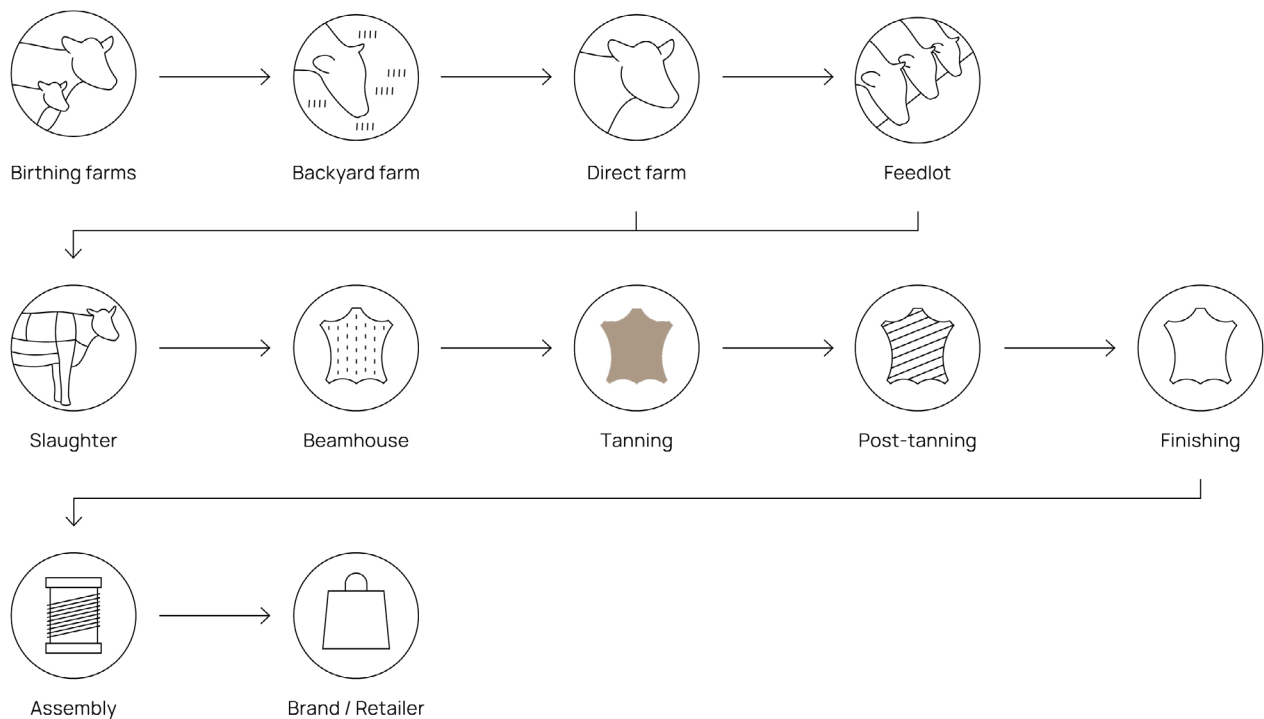
Leather's
impact on —

Introduction

While leather has long been considered an essential part of fashion, the many harms caused by its production require us to reconsider its future. Today, over 1.4 billion cattle have been bred and stand on once biodiverse land, commodified and exploited until they are slaughtered for production purposes. Leather is now often coated with plastic or tanned with harsh, carcinogenic chemicals, while the

ever-increasing scale of the fashion industry is utterly unsustainable. Leather supply chains are also highly industrialised, harmfully implicating many workers and surrounding communities, while making luxury and mainstream brands massive profits. In the third of our report series, the impact of leather production on animals is explored.

Supply chain overview



Leather is not a by-product

Despite common misconceptions, leather is not simply a worthless by-product, but a co-product. While the leather industry likes to claim skins are tanned as a kind of waste reduction initiative, supposedly making leather neither cruel nor unsustainable, this is not the case. Leather is a valuable co-product, with even the meat and dairy industries labelling it as such. The leather industry itself states the massive income losses involved in losing skin sales. This means the purchasing of leather helps fund harms across the entire supply chain.

Cattle as individuals, and cattle in the leather industry

The Leather Council states that 67% of skins used for leather belong to cattle and buffalo, followed by sheep (12%), pigs (11%) and goats (10%). It is estimated that less than 0.5% of leather is made from other animals.

This report focuses on cattle, who are recognised sentient beings capable of complex thought and action. The earliest domestication of cattle occurred over 10,000 years ago, and as a result our understanding of cattle outside of the framework of their use to humans is limited.

However, cattle display a full range of emotions including boldness, shyness, sociability, gregariousness, and being temperamental. They are herd animals and form strong social bonds, enjoy play, have awareness of their own actions and their consequences, are able to evaluate others and react to situations that cause them fear,

nervousness and discomfort. Cattle are aware of their own actions, experience excitement when learning, and are distressed and even grieve when separated from their family members. The leather industry prioritises profit before the wellbeing and life of cattle.

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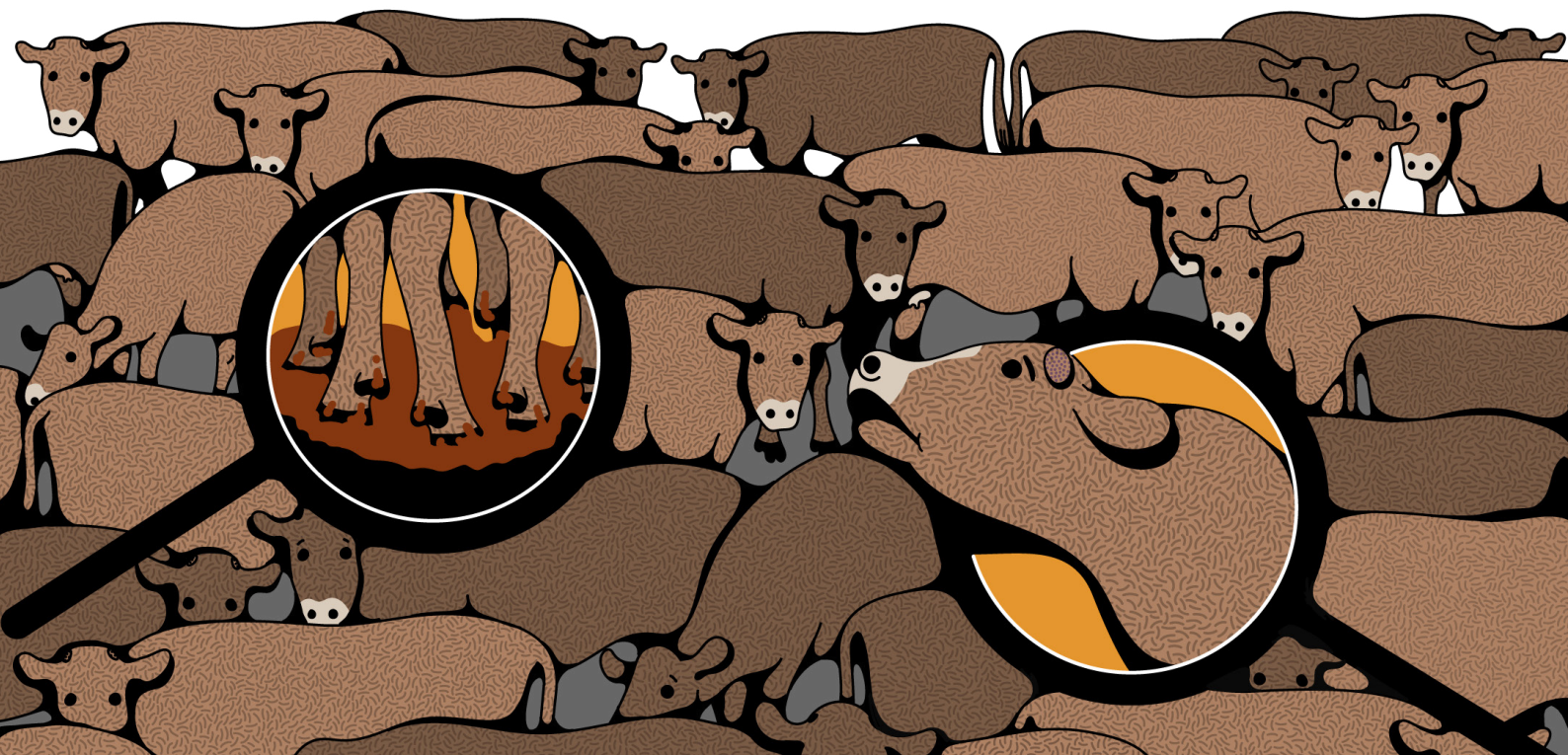


Standard mutilations in the leather supply chain

Cattle exploited in leather supply chains are routinely subjected to painful surgical procedures, largely and legally without pain relief. These mutilative practices are generally undertaken for economic reasons and some would not be necessary for the animal's (or herds') wellbeing if they were not being raised in intensive farming systems.

They are kept in crowded and confined conditions which prohibit their capacity to express natural behaviours, or in which the sheer number of cows being raised prohibits proper care. These include:

- Disbudding or dehorning without pain relief. This is the use of, sharp, metal tools, hot irons or caustic chemicals to remove nerve-rich budding horns.
- Castration without pain relief. This is where male calves have their testicles cut off, removed with blood supply-cutting tight bands, or constrained with a metal device that crushes the spermatic cord.
- Branding without pain relief where cattle are permanently marked on their skin with either a hot iron or liquid nitrogen, both of which cause pain.
- Nose ringing or piercing which is sometimes performed without pain relief to make controlling animals easier, when ropes are pulled through holes.
- Tail docking without pain relief. This sometimes occurs in the dairy and leather supply chain to 'improve cleanliness'.



Animal welfare legislation and bovines

Animal welfare is, in theory, protected to some degree in nine of the 10 largest cow skin producing countries (China does not currently have any stand-alone animal welfare legislation). Yet, animals reared for profit and production like cattle are routinely and intentionally exempted from the overarching protections and duty of care standards of animal welfare legislation.

This results in a global system where many practices undertaken by animal use industries are not subject to any form of enforceable regulation or oversight.

The routine use of painful procedures such as dehorning, castration, tail docking and branding without the use of anaesthesia or analgesia demonstrates the conflict between the use of animals as commodities for economic gain and the wellbeing of animals.

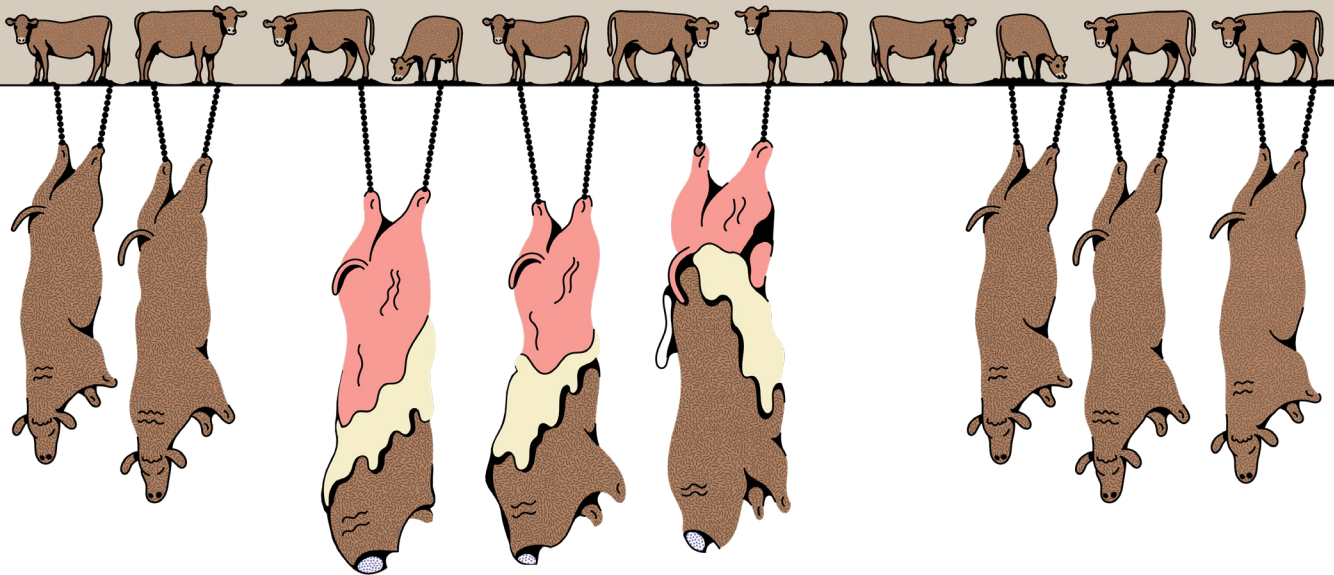
Due to exemptions in animal welfare legislation, which allow for the profitable exploitation of animals like cattle for food and fashion, most farmed animals are subject to mutilative practices that would be prohibited if similarly inflicted upon a cat or a dog.

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Feedlots

Feedlots exist to fatten up animals for the most profitable slaughter. They are commonly used in conjunction with pastures which raise animals for slaughter in leather supply chains, and are considered a kind of intensive factory-farming. It can be difficult to know whether or not a leather supply chain includes feedlots, due to the lack of transparency around background feedlots.



- A large portion of cattle across Brazil, the United States, Australia, China, Argentina, Europe and other major skin exporting locations spend at least part of their lifetime in a feedlot.
- Feedlots confine cattle closely together in unnatural conditions, increasing lameness and sickness, and decreasing enrichment and stimulation, as well as space to rest and behave naturally.
- Thousands of animals can be confined in feedlots with very little space. The compounding effects of stress and exposure to infectious viruses and bacteria in these facilities can lead to bovine respiratory disease, which is common.
- Cows can spend as much as a quarter of their life in a feedlot, and in some cases most of their life. Some cattle, like those in Brazilian feedlots, spend just the last 70 days of their life in feedlots, where they are rapidly fattened.
- Meanwhile, some calves in the United States are on feedlots from soon after weaning until their slaughter. Some of these calves are confined to individual stalls from three days old before being moved to a larger feedlot. In China, feedlots holding as many as 10,000 cattle at a time can confine these animals for nearly half their life.

Brand claims of 'high welfare' in unknown supply chains and a lack of media discussion relating to animals

Fashion Revolution's 2022 Fashion Transparency Index found that 58% of the 250 largest fashion brands and retailers had published animal welfare policies. Yet, just 12% of these same 250 companies were able to disclose where their raw materials are sourced from.

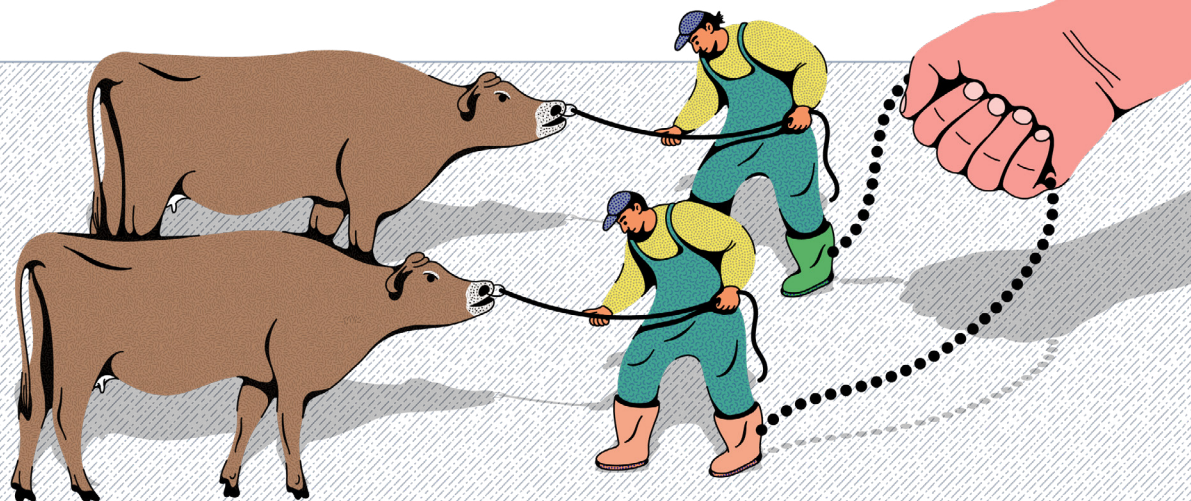
Brands may have policies opposing live export or mutilative practices without pain relief, for example, but without knowledge of where cattle in their leather supply chains are raised. These policies have no impact on those animals.

It is common for brands to include a note that leather is only sourced as a 'by-product', despite leather being a profitable co-product. Brands may also claim 'good animal husbandry' or 'ethical sourcing' despite having a limited animal welfare policy which fails to acknowledge or address many of the aforementioned industry standard cruelties in leather supply chains, or the way in which animals are slaughtered.

While brands fail to address the wellbeing of animals, fashion media fails to acknowledge this problem. Collective Fashion Justice's analysis of the three most popular fashion industry publications – *Women's Wear Daily* (WWD), *Vogue Business*, and *Business of Fashion* – highlighted that of all articles relating to leather and alternatives to it:

- Less than one quarter actually mention 'animal welfare', 'animal rights' or even animals themselves in the context of their wellbeing, rather than as a descriptor for the type of leather being used, or while exploring a related environmental impact such as grazing.
- Just 5% of articles explore a specific animal welfare or rights issue for more than a sentence, with most mentions of animal welfare being no more than a few words.

The fashion industry must reckon with the wellbeing of animals as no longer an ignorable aspect of responsible and sustainable fashion production: cruel commodification of animals cannot acceptably be sustained, and is woefully irresponsible.



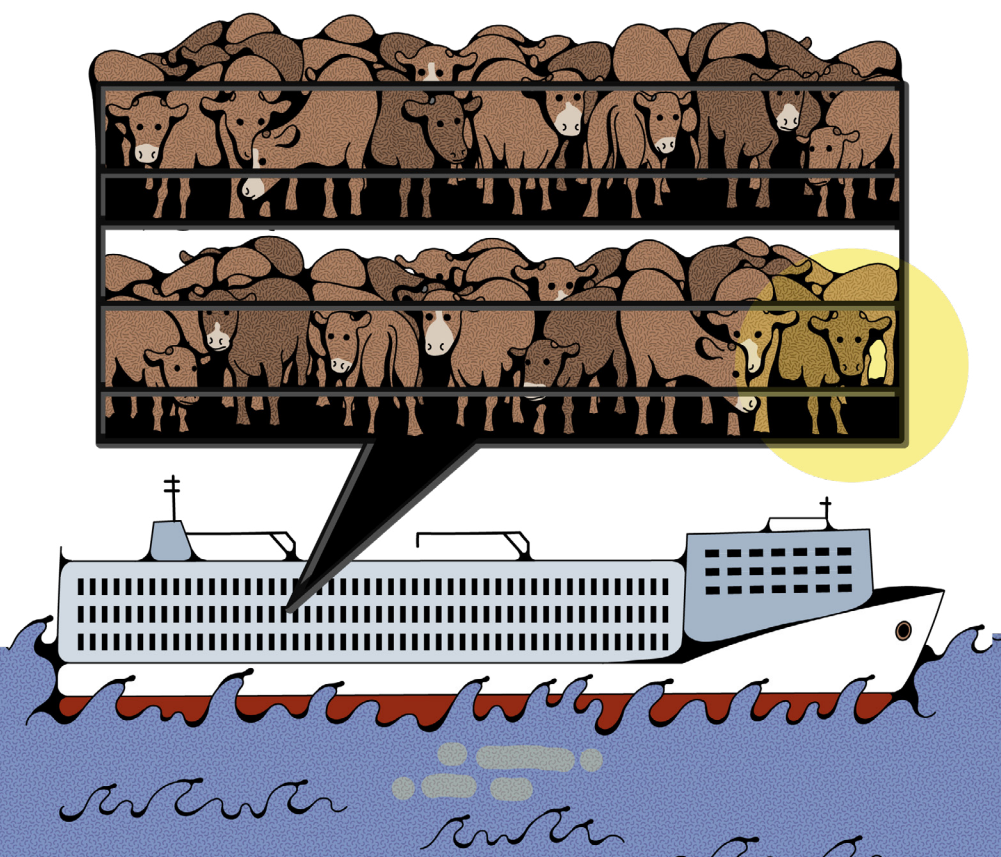
Transport to slaughter

Cattle are transported on land and across seas to slaughter in complicated supply chains. While transport standards aim to minimise suffering, such standards commonly require no more than bare minimum effort to reduce significant stress. Even when standards are adhered to, animals being transported are subject to extreme physical and psychological stress, as well as potential injury and death, especially in long-distance transport. Officials have noted that live export is nearly impossible to oversee and enforce standards on, stating that 'ship transports completely fall outside of any regulations or animal welfare standards'.

Ships holding as many as 20,000 cattle at once make tracing leather difficult.

- These ships have been documented to have no air conditioning or cleaning on board, with animals drowning in faeces, even 'cooking alive' in the intense heat. Cattle have been documented to be neglected, denied food and water, and even beaten across Asia, the UK and Europe.

- On land, some cattle travel by foot for miles towards their slaughter. In India, cow slaughter is largely illegal and cattle are smuggled to Bangladesh for the leather industry. To force cows to continue walking beyond exhaustion, cows are beaten, have their tails broken, and have chilli rubbed in their eyes. Cows have even been documented being waterboarded to get up, before arriving at road-side slaughterhouses.



Slaughter

Cows killed for 'luxurious' calf skin leather can be killed as young as five days old, while standard leather supply chains skin cattle between one and four years old, despite a lifespan of about two decades (if not more).



Global 'best practice' methods of slaughter are often driven by economic interest, rather than for the specific purpose of minimising inevitable pain and suffering. Every year, hundreds of millions of cattle are slaughtered worldwide, often under inhumane and distressing conditions.

Cattle are legally denied food and water before their slaughter to make disembowelment easier, and can be denied shelter while they wait. Cattle have a more acute perception of odours than humans and can sense stress in their fellow animals through smell. They also have excellent hearing and are highly sensitive to noise, becoming easily stressed by the sounds of the slaughterhouse.

Stress is inevitable in slaughterhouses. Reports have commonly shown cattle forced through the slaughter process when they

are sick, pregnant, injured, too exhausted to move, or fighting back, kicking. Such forceful methods include the excessive use of electrical prodding devices and beating. Ultimately, all cattle killed with 'best practice' are shot with a captive bolt gun or stunned by electrical means before being shackled by the legs and hung upside down for bleeding, where the major blood vessels of the neck and throat are severed resulting in death by exsanguination. Ineffective stunning resulting in a prolonged and painful death is shown to be common in studies.

“If compassion were a muscle, this work we did left it weak and atrophied.”

– Susana Chavez, ex-slaughterhouse worker

Actions for citizens

- **Avoid purchasing all new leather.**
Less harmful alternatives are available, while animal derived leather lacks transparency and causes the distress, suffering and commodification of animals associated with its sale.
- **Share our report with your favourite brands.**
Ask them to reconsider their use of leather, calling for a just transition to more ethical and sustainable materials. And consider asking them to change the way they promote leather in the meantime, to avoid ethics-washing.
- **Engage your community with these issues by sharing our resources, social media posts and other work.**
A new documentary called SLAY looks into some of the environmental impacts of leather, too, and may be useful for your community.
- **When shopping, consider if you really need to buy something.**
Opt for pre-loved fashion first, and then look for more sustainable and ethical leather alternatives like cork, washable paper, recycled synthetic leather, MIRUM, and other partly bio-based alternatives.



Animal Welfare.
Worldwide.

Under Their Skin - Volume 3
Leather's Impact on Animals

Download [full report here](#)

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Justice and FOUR PAWS