

SLF aims to provide sustainability roadmap for leather value chain

Deborah Taylor and Karl Flowers, co-founders of community-interest company Sustainable Leather Foundation (SLF), share the philosophy behind the organisation as well as the key goals and tools that are set to promote best practice across the whole leather industry. By **Isabella Griffiths**.



Deborah Taylor



Karl Flowers

ILM: What prompted you to launch the Sustainable Leather Foundation?

Deborah Taylor: We have worked with each other for many years and started brainstorming about what we could do for the industry that would be really valuable in terms of support and improvement, but also with a mechanism that is accessible and inclusive to all while supporting grassroots development as well as recognising the really good development at the top end. Sustainability is not just the metrics around environmental impact. It is the social dimension; it is the governance dimension. It is all those other things that need to be brought into the narrative of the leather industry, which is what we are hoping to do.

Karl Flowers: One of the things that we both felt very strongly at the time was that sustainability was moving so quickly, and greenwashing was becoming a really topical issue for brands and end users. What became apparent quickly was that you had to move the leather industry in a way that wasn't greenwashing, into an area where you needed to actually have some sustainability competence. The industry is progressing quickly, but we felt that it needed to accelerate further and that the SLF was going to be evidence- science- and very deep tech-based, much more than the industry had ever done before. We felt that we had the skill and competence to support that and the network to be able to supply those things in the form of a foundation. What was also very important to us was independence, true independence. There is a lot of commercial interests in our industry, and we felt that only with a foundation, a charity that is not-for-profit, that is extremely transparent, we would be able to prevent the greenwashing that was creeping up in so many areas. So, we established this community-interest company, made it non-profit, and put together a Board of Advisors who have done a fantastic job in guiding it.

ILM: Can you give an overview of the pillars that make up SLF's remit - Audit & Certification, the Transparency Dashboard and any other projects?

DT: The outward expression of what we are doing is the Transparency Dashboard, which is accessible via an integrated website and App using QR technology. The dashboard rates value chain partners at different points along their ESG journey via a simple traffic light system of progress, from 'not yet started' through 'in progress', 'passed' or 'failed', giving an easy and transparent overview of which stage a value chain compliance partner currently is in terms of meeting industry standards of risk assessment and performance. Further down the line, we will have a dashboard for chemical companies and a dashboard for machinery companies. We are already working with people in those areas to develop what that dashboard could look like, because it will be different. Eventually we will also have one for product manufacturers, one for farmers etc. So, we will be evolving this to encompass the whole value chain.

KF: This is underpinned very heavily by the SLF Audit Standard and that technical work that sits underneath that. Underpinning this technical work is support and guidance. So, we are layering everything up. And then, sitting alongside, we have Collaboration Hubs. These are designed specifically to allow anybody, irrespective of whether they are a partner or not, anybody who has a specific interest in an area of risk or area that we are involved in, to come along and join the conversation. Some of the work that we will be doing in these Collaboration Hubs will feed into the training, communication, the audit, so we are being very circular.

DT: We are currently doing all the development work on our Audit Standard. It has been through three rounds of review already, and we are hoping to have that published in July. The Audit Standard will be accredited.

ILM: How does the SLF Audit Standard differ from or complement the offer from the LWG, ICEC or CSCB, for example, which are already established?

DT: We are aware that there is not one size that fits all, therefore we wanted to recognise previous certification programmes, not just replace them, and integrate them into our system via an umbrella certification and work on the gaps. After all, we are only as good as our worst tannery. That is the reputation of the industry. So, we have to make sure that that collaboration effort works from the lowest up and does not just focus on the top end. We are aware that not everybody can jump straight in and meet the requirements of any one certification programme. We also firmly believe that what we do should be above competition. So, within the platform and within the transparency dashboard, we do not want to add to audit fatigue, to cost, to duplication of effort and resource. If somebody already has a certificate within another organisation that meets the requirements that we've laid out, then we will map that path over our dashboard and we will assign those paths to the certification for as long as it is in force or when it is being renewed. Crucially, we will summarise that by referencing where all those assessments have come from. Ultimately, the end vision of that is



that we will get to a situation where the brands will only look at the dashboard and check whether the suppliers meet specific requirements that are important to them, whether that is for environmental, for social or for governance, no matter who they are

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certified with. That is a decision for the tannery and the value chain, what matters is they are meeting a standard, not who they are certifying it with.

ILM: Your motto is 'industry-led and consumer-focused'. Can you elaborate on this?

DT: It is about switching the emphasis. A lot of what the industry has done up to now has been reactive at the brand request. Brands dictate, the industry then reacts. We need to change that, make it industry-led, take control for what is possible, where we can go and how we should do it. And once industry is doing it for themselves, then we can help the brands to create more informed messaging for their consumers.

KF: The whole leather value chain is extremely complicated and especially for external people hard to understand. Why can't we simplify it? Why can't we communicate it? The simple answer is because it is not fully transparent. It is not fully divulgent in terms of what links to what and when. So, we felt this was another important area of the scope of the foundation to make sure that we go from farm to the end of life to make sure that even what the consumers do with the leather at the end forms part of the story. Obviously, we cannot focus on all of that from the start, that is an enormous body of work and we do not have expertise in all of these areas. But we are extending the network of experts and stakeholders we are working with to get the expertise that is needed.

ILM: How can you support those tanneries who have never had an audit before?

DT: The modular approach to what we are doing means that the dashboard will just be completely grey to start with. Tanneries can still come onboard, and even if they are only able to work on one thing in any given year, they can just work on that, perhaps just social, and if they

get it, that section on that module goes green, everything else stays grey - tanneries can do it at their own pace. The most crucial part is, we do not exclude tanneries from coming onboard and participating while they are on that journey. In other groups, you can only become a member once you have passed an audit, and you need support to get to that point. So, we tried to think about a process that supports, encourages, recognises progress and keeps it completely transparent for the people that are looking at those tanneries.

KF: It lowers the barriers to entry. How can you have a high barrier of entry to something as important as sustainability? It makes no sense. Our approach is, get them on the ladder, support them, hit them with training and non-competitive, non-commercial information. We are trying to give them a sustainability roadmap that they can follow.

ILM: What are your short and long-term goals?

DT: We're in Year one, so this is our development year, this is where we are establishing the tool and launching the pilot schemes. Over the next couple of years, by Year three, we want to establish this within the wider value chain and get involved in those grassroots areas, especially the high producing, low-income countries to provide better understanding, more training and implementing workshops; we are talking with several of those country associations and we are really getting stuck in at the ground level. Alongside that, it is about extending the reach to the consumers and external media and not being afraid to talk to them. And then, in five years, we really want to have the SLF logo recognised globally as a symbol for trust and integrity in the leather industry. And that does not mean having a seal that says everything is perfect, but expressing that the organisations supporting that seal are working towards a sustainable future. |