



## **Guide No 1**

# **Sustainability and the Leather Industry**

## Facts about Leather

Leather is a durable, versatile and luxurious material that is manufactured using a by-product of the meat and dairy industry. Here are the top 10 most asked questions about leather as a sustainable choice.

### 1. Are Animals Killed For Leather?

No animal is killed to make leather. In fact, if all leather production stopped tomorrow, it would not save a single animal's life. It would result in millions of tonnes of waste material going to landfill where it would cause carbon emissions through decomposition.

### 2. Are harmful chemicals used to make Leather?

Chemicals are all around us—even water and oxygen are chemicals. Chemicals are used to produce all types of fabrics and materials, whether we are talking about dyes for colours or additives for water proofing. The leather industry abides by strict laws and regulations that prevent the use of harmful chemicals in production and products.

### 3. Is vegan leather more sustainable than natural leather?

There is no such thing as vegan leather. Leather is a term to describe material derived from an animal with collagen fibres. Vegan materials are mostly made from plastics, which can have a higher environmental impact than sustainably produced natural leather.

### 4. What is the difference between Chrome and vegetable tanned leather?

Chrome tanning is a cost effective, fast and efficient method of tanning hides using Chromium III salts. Chromium III is a safe chemical to use and can be recovered from the water treatment at the end of the process. In rare cases of bad production process and control, an oxidation reaction can take place that results in the formation of Chrome VI which is a known carcinogen. However, robust testing is in place to prevent that risk. Vegetable tanning uses natural barks, leaves and tannins from plants and has advantages for certain types of leather. The process is longer and requires taking materials from nature which involves careful management of the natural habitat from which the tannins are harvested. There

are other types of tannage chemistry that also suit different applications for the end product being made.

## **5. How does leather fit into the Circular Economy?**

Leather converts a waste material from the food industry into a valuable material. It provides long-lasting purpose in its original product life, and can readily be re-purposed or recycled. Some leather can be fully composted back into the ground when it has served its purpose, fertilising the land for crops and grazing in the future.

## **6. Is leather manufacture bad for the environment?**

All production creates emissions and leather is not excluded from that. Different materials will have different impacts at different parts of the lifecycle. For example leather uses a lot of water in production, but the leather product uses almost no water in cleaning (washing, machines, etc), and, as it lasts for many more years than a plastic alternative, it makes the impact calculation much lower. The leather industry is continually working to introduce more efficient methods of manufacture that reduce the impact on the environment.

## **7. What is a renewable source in leather?**

Leather's raw material is inherently sustainable. It comes from animals that will reproduce naturally as long we provide for the animals and look after them. As a comparison, plastic based materials come from petrochemicals that are chemicals derived from petroleum (crude oil) and natural gas. They serve as the foundation for many industrial products and processes, like plastics, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and energy. As oil is a non-renewable resource, the extraction and processing of petroleum to obtain petrochemicals has significant environmental and economic implications.

## **8. How long does leather last?**

If well looked after, leather products will last for decades. This makes it a sustainable option when considering environmental impact per wear. Leather will outlive any other fabric material used for the same purpose.

## **9. How do I know if a product is made with real leather?**

There are a number of ways you can check whether a product is real leather or an imitator. First check the label for the leather mark logo and look for labels like "genuine leather," "full-grain leather," or "top-grain leather." These terms indicate real leather. Be cautious with terms like "PU leather," "faux leather," or "vegan leather," which refer to synthetic (plastic) alternatives. Smell can sometimes be an indicator; real leather will have an earthy smell to it (often associated with new cars), whereas alternatives will have no smell at all. Additionally, leather will be softer and warmer to the touch and if you can see edges on your product, the real leather edges will look fibrous.

## **10. Does leather cause deforestation?**

Leather manufacture does not cause deforestation, however there are links in some countries between cattle raising and deforestation. Cattle farming is listed alongside other products such as rubber, paper, coffee, palm and soy as deforestation-risk commodities.

## **Sustainable Leather Foundation**

The Sustainable Leather Foundation's (SLF) vision is to enable collective improvement and education globally, for more sustainable practices in leather manufacture and production. SLF is concerned with all aspects of sustainability – Environmental, Social and Governance. As a not-for-profit organisation, SLF provides a transparent and inclusive approach to demonstrating sustainable good practice throughout the value chain.

Coupled with this, SLF is committed to ensuring that consumers have a clear mechanism to see and understand the sustainable attributes of leather as a material, and the work that the industry does to ensure good practice.

SLF's objective is to unite all leather value chain stakeholders in ensuring a sustainable future for the leather industry by shining a spotlight on innovation and best practice, providing a mechanism for improvement and education, while also preserving the social and economic wellbeing of communities in less advanced regions. You can find out more about the work of SLF here:

[www.sustainableleatherfoundation.com](http://www.sustainableleatherfoundation.com)

