



Collective
Fashion
Justice



BLOOD FEATHERS:

An investigation into
the ostrich feather industry



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PREFACE



Of the many industries that commodify and exploit wild animals, fashion is one of the worst. Millions of sentient beings are farmed, hunted and killed each year in ways that are truly horrific, and totally unnecessary.

Thankfully, public attitudes about the use of wild animals for clothing and accessories are shifting.

Items such as mink coats that were once signifiers of high-end luxury and refinement now languish in

closets. And the fashion industry itself has responded, with a growing number of fashion weeks, retailers and brands having banned the exhibition and sale of fur and skins.

In contrast, the use of feathers is still widespread, and regarded as not just acceptable but desirable and sophisticated. Celebrities that would never wear a fur coat in public attend the Met Gala draped in feather-laden creations produced by methods that are equally grotesque.

This new report from World Animal Protection and Collective

Fashion Justice exposes the suffering of ostriches on farms in South Africa, where most feathers are sourced. The acute cruelty uncovered should see the fashion industry add ostrich feathers to the list of materials and products it shuns and instead embrace responsible, kinder alternatives which maintain similar or even stronger aesthetic appeal.

We hope that this report will motivate the fashion industry to continue its journey towards becoming wildlife-free, on behalf of the millions of wild animals who continue to suffer for the sake of fashion industry profits.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Ostrich feathers are a prominent feature across global fashion, from luxury runway collections and red carpet looks to high street brands and fast fashion online retailers. Despite industry claims of “good animal welfare,” there remains a gulf between feather industry practices and consumer values that should give fashion brands pause.

Through 2023 to 2025, World Animal Protection and Collective Fashion Justice conducted desktop research into the ostrich feather industry and the fashion industry supply chain, confirming South Africa remains

the dominant supplier of ostrich products globally.

In 2026, World Animal Protection commissioned an on-the-ground investigation offering rare insight into South Africa’s ostrich feather farming industry. The aim was to understand the reality of the commercial ostrich feather farming industry as well as assessing the welfare of the ostriches kept on key farms supplying ostrich feathers to the global fashion industry.

This investigation uncovered several critical aspects of the ostrich feather industry and the realities of commercial exploitation, highlighting the widespread cruelty involved in feather harvesting. At one farm visited during this investigation, ostriches were described to our

investigators as having been live plucked every six months, confirming the continued use of this painful harvesting method.

Other farms preferred a harvesting method of feather ‘cutting’, where ostriches have their feather cut above the bloodline with the remaining feather later pulled from the skin, rather than plucked in one single process. While this may seem like an alternative to live plucking, this investigation uncovered evidence showing that the process is extremely distressing for the ostriches involved. Furthermore, this investigation produced direct evidence showing numerous instances where blood was witnessed on the end of feathers during farm visits, exposing doubt on so-called ethical cutting practices.



One of the most problematic claims of the ostrich feather industry – and regurgitated by the fashion industry – is that ostrich feathers are collected through a natural molting process. Based on the evidence available in this investigation, large-scale commercial supply through natural molting appears biologically and commercially implausible. Our findings also showed a stark difference between commercial ostrich feather farming and public show farms, which misrepresent the realities of the industry.

It is not only the feather harvesting process that causes distress to ostriches, but the captive conditions that ostriches are kept in. Ostriches were seen with visible injuries, acting with aggression towards each other, unable to stand up and with wounds

caused by birds pecking at each other's eyes and feathers. Sick or injured birds were sent to slaughter rather than the "financially unviable" alternative of medical treatment.

This report also examines the responsibility of luxury fashion in shaping consumer trends, and the devastating impact of ostrich feather use trickling down to mass produced, fast fashion. We identify the reputational risk to fashion weeks, retailers and brands that continue to use ostrich feathers as visibility over cruel practices within the ostrich feather industry increases.

Positively, we highlight brands, retailers and various fashion week events that have been implementing wildlife friendly policies to protect wild animals,

from ostriches to minks and crocodiles. Despite this, many continue to lag behind when it comes to policy around ostrich feather use, which continues to grow within luxury and fast fashion.

Finally, this report explores material innovation that replaces or mimics the use of feathers, showcasing the exciting opportunity for the industry to move away from feathers in a way that expands, rather than limits, creativity.

The fashion industry must act now to move away from the use and exploitation of ostriches for their feathers and instead choose responsible materials which support a future where wild animals remain in the wild, where they belong.

INVESTIGATION CONTEXT

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In 2024, World Animal Protection and Collective Fashion Justice released our first report ‘Feathers are the New Fur: Cruelty in Disguise’, introducing the use of wild bird feathers in the fashion industry and the welfare issues that exist within commercial feather farming. Importantly, this research highlighted the need for further investigation as a significant lack of transparency on how ostrich feathers are harvested within commercial farming systems was exposed.

For this report, extensive desktop research was conducted during 2023–2025 to identify any publicly available links between specific farms, feather suppliers and the fashion industry in order to understand the ostrich feather industry further and how the global fashion industry fuels feather demand. This research included reviews of published supplier lists, analysis of import and export trade data and review of international and local trade media.

Importantly, this desktop research exposed a concerning lack of transparency within the ostrich feather industry highlighting the need for further investigation into the industry.

Despite this lack of transparency, the vast majority of ostrich feather products surveyed across Europe, the United States, China and Australia traced back to South Africa, confirming the country remains the dominant producer internationally.

South Africa produces 75% of the world’s ostrich products (including feathers, meat and skin). The country’s ostrich farming centers around the Western Cape Province in the Klein Karoo area and surrounding regions. Oudtshoorn, a major center in this region, is considered the ‘Ostrich Capital of the World’. The industry relies heavily on international demand and industry trends, with 90% of all ostrich products produced in this region being exported.¹

In 2026, World Animal Protection commissioned an on the ground investigation which was carried

out by an independent specialist investigation agency focusing on this epicenter of South Africa’s ostrich farming industry. The fieldwork aimed to gather an understanding of local conditions around key farms and facilities including those identified to be linked to two major producers of ostrich feather – Cape Karoo International (CKI) and Ostrich Products South Africa (OPSA) – who supply to the wider fashion industry as a whole. Ostrich sites around the Klein Karoo region in the Western Cape of South Africa were visited during this investigation, including farms, surrounding fields and a feather processing facility. These visits also included public ‘show farm’ tours, documenting the public representation of ostrich farming, as well as private commercial farm tours, exposing the welfare conditions for birds on these farms.



SOUTH AFRICA'S OSTRICH FEATHER FARMING INDUSTRY

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ORIGINS OF COMMERCIAL OSTRICH FEATHER FARMING IN SOUTH AFRICA



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Originally hunted across savannas for their high-value feathers, commercial farming of ostriches was established in South Africa in the 1860s to meet the increased demand of feather use in fashion throughout Europe and the British Empire.² Feathers were the first product to be commercially farmed from ostriches, consistently ranking within South Africa's most profitable products alongside gold and sheep wool.³

Throughout history, the ostrich feather industry has experienced rapid growth, with 'feather booms' driven by fashion industry trends. On the flip side, there have been significant industry collapses during disease outbreaks or when these trends turned, resulting in large-scale culling of birds who are no longer of value to the industry. Historically, during

these culls only ostriches with the highest feather quality by fashion industry standards were kept.⁴

Ostrich farming for leather and meat production did not fully establish itself in South Africa until nearly a century after large-scale ostrich farming began, with the development of local biltong (dried meat) processing in 1950,

and later through purpose-built export facilities in the 1990s.⁵ Together, these developments highlight that both the leather and meat industries were strategic expansions built upon the foundations of a pre-existing ostrich feather farming system, rather than feather production being a by-product of existing leather and meat farming.

IMPORTANT DATES IN SOUTH AFRICA'S OSTRICH FEATHER INDUSTRY

1820: First ostrich feathers exported for fashion

Wild ostriches are hunted for their feathers for export to European markets, marking the start of the lucrative ostrich feather export industry in South Africa.⁶

1860s: Commercial ostrich farming begins

Industry recognizes the potential of ostrich feathers and establishes the first commercial ostrich farms in the Klein Karoo region.⁶

1875–1880:

The first ostrich boom

Ostrich feathers become South Africa's fourth most valuable product after tobacco, viticulture (grape cultivation) and wheat.⁷

1885: Market collapse and over-production

The ostrich feather market faces major collapse due to over-production in a saturated market and poor feather quality.⁴

1897: The second ostrich feather boom

Feather demand surges again, driving rapid wealth accumulation for the feather industry. During this time land prices rose significantly and expansive estates were built, known as "feather palaces".⁴

1930: Mass cull and restructuring

Due to industry collapse, a mass cull of ostriches occurs which sees the number of farmed birds decline from one million to 23,000. Only the best breeding birds in terms of feather quality are retained.⁸

1914–1918: World War I industry collapse

WWI disrupts international trade and shipping routes. Fashion trends also shift resulting in the collapse of the ostrich feather industry, leaving South Africa's industry in economic hardship.⁷

1913: Feathers export numbers peak

Ostrich feathers rank the fourth largest export from South Africa after gold, diamonds and wool. By 1914, the farmed ostrich population reaches one million birds.⁸

1907: Live export ban

New laws make the live export of South Africa's ostriches illegal, further protecting the country's monopoly over the lucrative global feather trade.⁸

1950: Ostrich meat processing begins

The first ostrich slaughterhouse opens as dried ostrich meat (biltong) gains popularity in local markets, adding a new revenue stream.⁸

1959: Monopoly of feather supply

The Klein Karoo Korporasie, now Cape Karoo International, obtains single channel marketing rights for ostrich feathers resulting in a monopoly of the market with full control over distribution, pricing and eliminating competition and private trading.⁸

1962: Animal cruelty law

The South African *Animals Protection Act 71 of 1962* is established, applying to farmed ostriches. Examples of prohibited conducts include confinement that causes suffering, unnecessarily denying food or water, and deliberately or negligently keeping an animal in a dirty or parasitic condition.⁹

1993: Slaughterhouse opens for European export

The first ostrich slaughterhouse is built specifically to meet European export demand for ostrich meat, marking entry of ostrich meat into global markets.⁸

2026: World Animal Protection expose industry cruelty

World Animal Protection investigation exposes cruelty to ostriches on feather farms in South Africa including brutal feather plucking and cutting practices.¹¹

2015: PETA investigation and controversy

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) releases never-before-seen investigative footage from a South African ostrich slaughterhouse supplying luxury brands Hermès and Prada. The footage reveals live plucking and brutal slaughter practices, sparking global concerns around animal welfare.¹⁰

2001: Ostrich farming guidelines are published

The South African Ostrich Business Chamber (SAOBC) publishes suggested guidelines for ostrich farmers under the Code of Conduct for the Commercial Production of Ostriches.

1998: The South African Ostrich Business Chamber (SAOBC) is launched

to represent industry interests in ostrich product supply.¹

1996: Meat and skin demand increases

Slaughterhouses and tanneries are established to meet growing global demand for ostrich leather and meat products.⁵

SOUTH AFRICA'S OSTRICH FEATHER INDUSTRY TODAY

Ostrich feather products remain a primary focus for many commercial ostrich farms as well as being an integral component of the ostrich industry's overall profitability. **Today, the industrial rearing and killing of ostriches for their feathers is a multi-million-dollar business.**

In 2026, World Animal Protection submitted a freedom of information request to the South African government to clarify information on export numbers and the value of South Africa's ostrich feather industry. Findings revealed that in the 2024/2025 season over 150 metric tons of ostrich feather were exported at a total value of more than US\$60 million. During this 12-month period, 150,000 ostriches were slaughtered in South Africa, a 7% increase from the previous season.¹²

South Africa does not appear to have detailed, species-specific, legally binding welfare regulations governing all aspects of commercial ostrich

farming comparable to those that exist for some other livestock sectors. Welfare is largely governed through general anti-cruelty legislation plus industry "soft law" standards and codes. The South African ostrich industry's principal welfare standards are not established by independent regulators but by the industry itself. Through the South African Ostrich Business Chamber (SAOBC), which exists to represent and advance the interests of ostrich producers and processors, the sector has developed its own voluntary welfare, production and certification framework.¹⁴

Cape Karoo International (CKI), largely situated in Oudtshoorn, dominates the global ostrich feather industry. CKI states they produce 80% of the global supply of high-quality ostrich feathers.¹⁵ While desktop research conducted in 2023/2024 linked CKI to supplying luxury brands including Louis Vuitton, Dior, Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent, our 2026 investigation findings exposed they also supply to the China market, including fast fashion giant, Shein. Running four slaughterhouses, two ostrich skin tanneries, a feather

processing facility and sourcing from 340 registered ostrich farms, they produce 70% of all ostrich feathers exported from South Africa, including high and low-quality feathers.¹⁶

Ostrich Products South Africa (OPSA), also based in Oudtshoorn, operates as part of the privately owned Saag Jonker Group – one of the largest vertically integrated ostrich farming and processing businesses globally. Unlike CKI's cooperative-style network, OPSA controls its own supply chain, managing flocks, processing and export within a single corporate structure. The company focuses primarily on the export of premium ostrich leather and feathers to the fashion industry, with desktop research through 2023/2024 linking the company to supplying brands such as Armani and Lacoste.¹⁷

While members of the SAOBC, including CKI and OPSA, are expected to adhere to the set Standard and Certification Scheme requirements as an industry-created voluntary standard, there is no legal requirement to do so.

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SOUTH AFRICA'S OSTRICH FEATHER INDUSTRY IN NUMBERS (2024/2025)

Supplies 75% of the world's ostrich feathers¹³



90% of all ostrich products (feathers, meat, leather) are **exported**¹



150 tonnes of ostrich feathers, enough to fill **12 Olympic swimming pools** were exported at a total value of more than US\$60 million



150,000 ostriches were slaughtered for their feathers, meat and skin

THE WELFARE REALITIES OF COMMERCIAL OSTRICH FEATHER FARMING

NATURAL MOLTING: MYTH VS REALITY

In the wild, ostriches do not have a natural mass molting season but rather maintain their feathers year-round to protect themselves from the elements. Despite this, the fashion industry repeatedly emphasizes the ostrich's so-called natural molt, specifically through interviews in international media.

In a 2020 article published by South Africa's major agricultural magazine *Landbou*, a farmer supplying to CKI explains they were "fortunately able to convince delegates from the French fashion house Hermès with a feather harvesting demonstration that ripe feathers would fall out anyways".¹⁸ Lady Gaga's opening performance at the 2024 Paris Olympics featured an enormous number of ostrich feathers. She later



claimed she collaborated with luxury fashion brand Dior to create custom costumes using naturally molted feathers.¹⁹

World Animal Protection polling results across the United Kingdom, United States, Australia and New Zealand demonstrate the strong

influence of the industry's natural molt narrative on consumer perceptions. When asked how ostrich feathers used in fashion are most commonly obtained, the largest share of respondents (47%) believed feathers are collected during natural shedding.

In contrast, fewer participants identified methods involving animal harm, with just 27% understanding that feathers can be collected after slaughter, 16% believing feathers are plucked from live birds, and just 10% identifying cutting feathers from ostriches while alive.

These findings highlight a significant gap in transparency within the fashion industry, indicating that current information provided to the public may not line up with the realities of commercial ostrich feather production.

The SAOBC do not clearly define or restrict the specific methods used to harvest feathers in their Standard and Certification Scheme.¹⁴ As ostriches do not shed feathers in quantities or consistency suitable for large-scale supply, molting is not referenced as a viable harvesting method within any commercial ostrich farming industry regulations or guidelines.

Instead, feathers are collected through scheduled harvesting processes to meet global demand, highlighting a key gap between the concept of 'natural molt' feathers and the realities of commercial production.

During World Animal Protection's 2026 investigation, a visit to a commercial feather processing facility in the Klein Karoo region, a manager explained it takes "three birds worth of feathers to make the 2.2lbs bundles for auction".

This claim casts further doubt on the industry's natural molt narrative as it would be extremely difficult to achieve the volume of ostrich feathers being exported from South Africa (150 metric tons



in 2024/25) through only naturally molted feathers. As part of the investigation, ostrich 'show farms' in the Klein Karoo region were also visited, exposing stark differences between what is publicly presented of the industry versus the realities of commercial ostrich farming.

As well as marketing themselves as an authentic commercial

agricultural operation, show farms also cater to tourists by offering guided tours where visitors can interact with ostriches, dine on ostrich meat, and purchase ostrich skin and feather products.²⁰

In reality, show farms in the region offer a cleaner, more polished, unrealistic image of the industry when compared to the commercial farms in the region.

"It's different if you're on a commercial farm, next to a show farm. Commercial farms will really show you what the challenges are. Show farms, they can talk a lot of nonsense."

– Ostrich farmer from a commercial feather farm, speaking to investigators



FEATHER HARVESTING CRUELTY

Feathers for the fashion industry are taken from the wing area of the ostrich for premium feathers, as well as the body and tail for lower quality feathers. Higher quality feathers are primarily either plucked or cut while the ostrich is alive, while lower quality feathers can be plucked before or after slaughter.

Live plucking is the forcible removal of immature feathers that are still connected to living tissue, resulting in pain, bleeding and significant welfare concerns.²¹



On one show farm tour, they explained that the plucking only happens on the commercial farms. A later visit to a commercial ostrich farm supplying feathers and skins confirmed the continued use of live plucking within the industry, where

it was explained the farm 'plucks feathers every six months' from the wing area to supply high-quality feathers, while feathers from the body are only taken post-slaughter so as not to damage profits made from the sale of the ostrich's skin.

Key glossary of feather terms

Feather germ: Where new feathers grow

Follicle: Where the feather sits in the skin

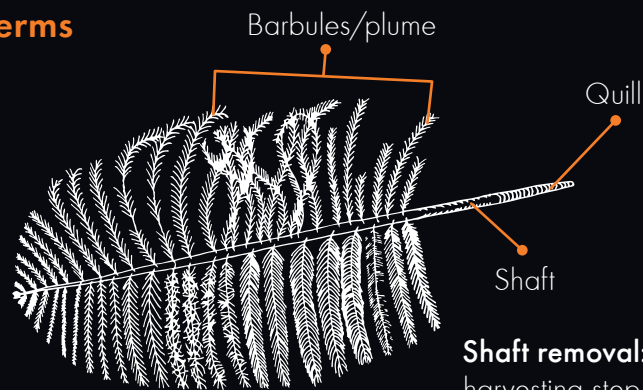
Plume: The soft, visible feather fibers

Quill: The lower part inside the skin

Shaft: The central stem

Blood feather: A developing, immature feather that contains an active blood supply within the shaft; if harvested during this growth stage, it can bleed and/or cause pain.

Feather cutting: The method of harvesting plumage by cutting the feather above the skin, leaving the quill and lower feather shaft intact inside the follicle.



Live plucking: The painful practice of forcibly plucking feathers out of the skin, which also triggers regrowth.

Natural molting: A natural process where old, dead feathers loosen and are naturally shed by the bird to allow new plumage to grow.

Ripe feather: A fully mature, dead feather with no active blood supply in the shaft at the end of its natural molting cycle.

Shaft removal: A secondary harvesting step following feather cutting, where the remaining feather is pulled or plucked out from the follicle to induce a new feather to grow.

Note: During World Animal Protection's investigation, removal of the remainder of the feather, sometimes named 'quilling', was referred to by farmers as 'shaft removal'. Therefore, this terminology is used throughout this report to reference the removal of the remaining feather from the skin after feather cutting.



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During a farm visit, one producer stated that they prefer feather cutting as an alternative to live plucking. This method typically occurs in two stages: the cutting of the feather above the skin surface followed by removal of the feather shaft from the follicle to enable a new feather to grow.^{2, 22}

If left alone, the remaining shaft of the feather would naturally fall out on their own. However, on one feather farm visited during this investigation, the shafts are forcibly pulled after just two weeks, typically using pliers, to help accelerate regrowth. Similarly to live plucking, premature removal can cause pain and stress to ostriches and may lead to bleeding and tissue damage.

As part of the 2026 investigation, rare footage of this practice was captured – including both feather cutting and shaft removal – at



a farm within the luxury fashion industry's supply chain. The footage shows an ostrich being chased by a group of men, restrained, and fitted with a burlap sack-like bag over their head. This process known as 'hooding' is to

obscure the bird's vision, with the intention of pacifying them. While immobilized, four workers cut and pulled at the ostrich's feathers using pliers with no anaesthetic or pain relief. This is the distressing reality of feather harvesting.



© World Animal Protection

During feather cutting and quill removal, ostriches are typically herded by a team of five to six workers into a restraining device known as a box or "bochst" and a bag is placed over their heads, so that workers can pull feather quills more easily.

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The SAOBC voluntary standards discourage feather plucking from live ostriches and recommend that feather harvesting should avoid unnecessary pain and injury, with only mature ("ripe") feathers – those without an active blood supply – being cut above the bloodline to minimize harm.¹⁴ In theory, this positions feather cutting as a low-impact process. However, these standards rely heavily on industry self-regulation and do not clearly prescribe or enforce detailed harvesting practices at farm level.



© World Animal Protection

Evidence gathered during our investigation challenges the reliability of these protections in practice. Despite the industry's claim that only fully matured feathers are harvested, multiple 'blood' feathers were observed throughout our investigation at

feather farms supplying the fashion industry. The presence of these immature feathers indicates that harvesting may occur before feathers are fully developed, raising serious concerns about compliance and oversight within commercial ostrich feather production.

In addition, the practice of 'shaft removal' after only a few weeks to help accelerate feather regrowth raises an important question: is there any material difference between this practice and live plucking?

OTHER ANIMAL WELFARE CONCERNS ON FARMS

Ostriches used in commercial farming endure a range of welfare issues. Footage from World Animal Protection's 2026 investigation reveals stereotypical behaviors displayed by ostriches, often a sign of stress or the psychological impacts of captivity. Captivity constrains the natural behavior of animals – in the case of farmed ostriches, these constraints include being:

- » Confined behind fencing in a space much smaller than their natural roaming area/home range.
- » Prevented from expressing natural behaviors associated with a flightless prey species, including moving freely across open landscapes, maintaining distance from perceived threats, and escaping through running.
- » Forced into unnatural social structures and breeding processes.
- » Exposed to frequent human handling and management practices that can cause fear, stress and injury in a species that naturally avoids threats.
- » Unable to exercise to the same extent as they would in the wild. Ostriches are the fastest birds on land and are adapted for long-distance movement and rapid escape responses.
- » Transported in a distressing environment to slaughter, risking injury or death before arrival.²¹

During World Animal Protection's investigation, farm guides emphasized the importance of good animal welfare, however



Beak guards (or "beak bits") are used in ostrich farming to reduce harmful pecking behavior and injuries between birds. © World Animal Protection



Ostriches in commercial farming systems can experience stress-related behaviors as well as aggression, often reflected in feather tail pecking and/or eye pecking. © World Animal Protection



a number of welfare concerns were observed during these visits. Ostriches were seen displaying stereotypical behaviors of distress, such as repetitive fence pecking and aggression toward each other.

Guides at one farm addressed concerns over an ostrich with an injured eye. They explained how the birds often pick at each other's feathers and eyes during fights, and that beak guards are sometimes used to prevent harm from infighting. Another ostrich at the same farm had a visible slice

to their neck as a result of running into the wire fencing.

On feather farms ostriches are kept alive for feather harvesting while also being used for breeding to produce eggs and chicks for sale. During breeding season, the testosterone in male ostriches increases and they begin to show signs of aggression. One farmer confirmed that being kept in close proximity to males during the breeding season can cause stress in female ostriches because of an increase in male bird aggression during this time.²³

A SLAUGHTER INDUSTRY

In the wild ostriches can live 30 to 40 years, but birds used for their feathers for the fashion industry are killed within a fraction of their natural lifespan.¹

In 2015, an investigation into the ostrich industry by animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) exposed brutal slaughter practices. In the footage, ostriches were being forcibly restrained. Investigators reported that birds were driven into stun boxes, electrically stunned, and then had their throats cut. Footage also showed ostriches witnessing other birds being slaughtered immediately ahead of them in the processing line.¹⁰

There is no feather production system supplying the fashion industry that does not ultimately end in slaughter. During our investigation, ostriches bred for high-quality feathers were kept alive, enduring feather cutting or plucking throughout the years. Once an ostrich's feather quality, egg production or breeding quality declines, they are sent to slaughter, if not culled earlier due to illness or injury. Ostriches bred for their meat, skins and/or lower quality feathers are plucked once (pre or post-slaughter) and killed at 10 to 14 months.¹

Ostriches sent for slaughter endure distressing transport to the slaughter facilities. During World Animal Protection's investigation, one farm visited explained that although the time of transport from the farm to the slaughterhouse was only one hour, these journeys posed significant risks for both ostriches and workers. One ostrich witnessed on the farm was found to



Ostrich slaughter captured during a PETA 2015 investigation into the commercial ostrich industry. © People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) US



Ostriches being transported to slaughter, captured during a PETA 2015 investigation into the commercial ostrich industry. © People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) US

have a skin wound on their neck. A worker stated this happened during transport to the farm when the ostrich fell and was trampled by another ostrich.

Further describing the process of transport, they explained a truck is used which is separated into chambers that workers travel on top of to "make sure the birds don't sit down because they'll kill each other straight away". The birds are held up using a makeshift sling to prevent them from sitting during transport which would risk them being trampled, injured or killed.

At slaughter facilities, ostriches can remain conscious of their surroundings and witness the

handling and slaughter of other birds. They are restrained and electrically stunned, then shackled and hoisted. Their jugular veins and carotid arteries are cut, and they are left to bleed out. Concerns have been raised about the adequacy of stunning and the distress caused during these processes.¹⁰

While the keeping of live ostriches to supply high-quality feathers to the fashion industry is an integral part of ostrich production, the ostrich industry is ultimately a slaughter industry. Ostriches used throughout the supply chain always end up at the slaughterhouse.

MYTH BUSTING: FEATHERS, A BY-PRODUCT OR PRIMARY PRODUCT?

During World Animal Protection Australia's 2026 investigation, we assessed whether ostrich feathers existed as a by-product of meat and skin industries or if they are a profitable primary product on their own.

An Italian plumassier, who sources from South Africa to create luxury feather garments for the luxury fashion industry, disclosed that ostriches are "left alive for the feathers". They further stated this enables the "long and fluffy" feathers used in high-quality products.

Major farms supplying OPSA confirmed feathers to be their primary income, explaining "the main product of the ostrich that makes the most money is the feathers. We export to all over Europe, to China and South America."

Throughout the investigation, two main commercial farming systems were identified: those primarily focused on supplying feathers to the fashion industry, and those producing at a higher scale for skins, meat and feathers for the global fashion industry and European meat trade.

Within those farms focused on supplying feathers, ostriches are kept alive to produce high-quality feathers for the luxury fashion industry, as well as lower quality feathers for fast fashion brands and feather dusters. These ostriches are also used to maintain a breeding population to produce eggs and hatchlings for sale.



Ostriches on feather farms are sent to slaughter once feather or breeding quality declines. Feather farms receive income from the sale of hatchlings, chicks, and the skin and meat of culled birds, however the primary income is gained through ostrich feather sale to the fashion industry.

In contrast, farms that are focused on the rearing and slaughtering of ostriches for feathers, skin and meat operate at a larger scale in terms of ostrich slaughter numbers. The income from these farms meets demand for ostrich skins used for wallets, belts and handbags in the

luxury fashion industry, meat for a niche European based market and feathers for luxury and fast fashion as well as the feather duster industry. While a population of adult ostriches is maintained, ostriches within this farming system are typically slaughtered at 9-14 months, where the feathers are then plucked from the animal before or after slaughter.^{24, 25}

Rather than a by-product to ostrich meat or skins, feather farming is in fact a vital component of the ostrich farming industry.

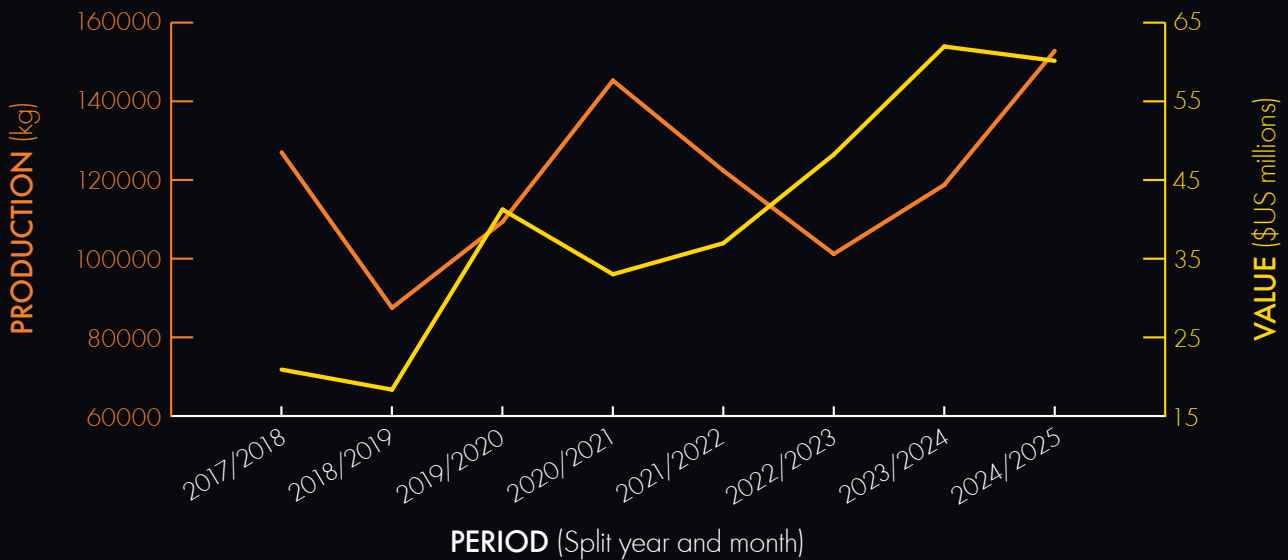
LUXURY FASHION IS DRIVING INCREASED FEATHER USE

In 2024, World Animal Protection and Collective Fashion Justice released our report, 'Feathers are the New Fur: Cruelty in Disguise'.²⁶ This report found feathers are increasingly being used as an alternative to fur, as the social acceptability of fur products declines. Unfortunately, this shift from fur to feathers does not eliminate cruelty, it simply changes the species who suffers.



In 2026, World Animal Protection submitted a freedom of information request to the South African government to clarify information on export numbers and the value of South Africa's ostrich feather industry. This data revealed feather exports out of South Africa between 2018 and 2025 increased 20.3%, with over 150 metric tons of feathers being exported in the 2024/2025 season. The dollar value of the ostrich feather industry itself has increased exponentially over the last decade, with a total value of more than US\$60 million in 2025, compared with US\$20.8 million in 2018, an 188% increase.

SOUTH AFRICA OSTRICH FEATHER EXPORTS 2017-2025



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A-list celebrities wearing ostrich feather designs from Chanel, Dior, Valentino, Balenciaga and Gucci featured heavily across 2025 and 2026 global red-carpet events.²⁷ At the 2026 Met Gala, ostrich feathers featured as a dominant trend reinforcing their use as a defining design aesthetic of the moment, with director of the gala, Anna Wintour, and Gala co-chair Nicole Kidman both wearing feather-featured designs by Chanel.²⁸

As Head of the Feather Division at CKI explained, global fashion events act as key marketing platforms for the ostrich feather industry: "If you want to see a good exposure of our products, it will be, like, the Met Gala, in New York."²⁹

During World Animal Protection's 2026 investigation, feather farms also were quick to claim association with luxury brands, including Dior, Louis Vuitton, Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent while also referencing Dior's feathers featured in Lady Gaga's Olympic performance confirming previous supply chain research for this report.

On the flip side, they were less inclined to admit to supplying fast fashion brands, however one feather processing facility that supplies to luxury brands confirmed they also supply to fast fashion giant, Shein. Furthermore, they stated many of their feathers are sold to China, but only "the lowest of low quality".

Global fashion weeks continue to showcase ostrich feathers on the runway. Across the 2025/2026 shows in New York, London, Milan and Paris, feathers appeared across dozens of collections with brands including Prada, Dior, Balenciaga, Valentino and Alexander McQueen incorporating plumage into ready-to-wear and couture.³⁰

Luxury fashion is incredibly influential. It creates trends and drives what is considered desirable all the way down to fast fashion. With this power comes responsibility, yet too often fashion continues to cause immense harm by creating demand for products that involve wild animal suffering.

TRACEABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY ISSUES

As an industry built on trends, the ostrich feather industry has historically experienced booms as well as dramatic falls in trade. However, unlike previous feather booms where ostrich feathers have been used primarily in luxury fashion, the 2020s have seen a steady growth in popularity of ostrich feather use within large fashion brands and retailers as trims on clothing, handbags and shoes.³²

Desktop research conducted in 2024/2025 highlighted an issue with transparency in ostrich feather supply chains, specifically within mass market brands. During research conducted by World Animal Protection in 2024/2025 into published supplier lists, not a single supplier was able to provide details of traceability for their ostrich feathers.

This echoes broader findings about supply chain transparency in the fashion industry. Fashion Revolution's latest Fashion Transparency Index (2023) found that while 58% of the 250 largest fashion brands and retailers have published animal welfare policies, just 12% can disclose where even some of their raw materials are sourced.³¹

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Potentially, the complicated and obscure ostrich feather supply chain makes transparency difficult to trace for end users – that is, fashion brands and houses.

The supply chain pathway typically runs as follows:

1. Individual farmers sell raw feathers to primary processors, where feathers from multiple farms are often pooled and graded together.
2. Processed feathers are exported using generic tariff classifications that group goods by type and processing level rather than species or origin.
3. International manufacturers work feathers into finished products – trims, embroidery, decorative elements – which are often reclassified again in the process, which may make end-to-end traceability complicated to achieve in practice.

However, this problem is not unique to the fashion industry and has been overcome in other sectors. We believe that traceability is – and must be – achievable.

Through independent supply chain research, we traced specific farms to specific brands, suggesting that the current lack of information available to consumers about material sourcing may result from due diligence issues in the fashion industry rather than a fixed constraint.



Dolce & Gabbana's ostrich feather dress sells for over US\$30,000 with the brand claiming the use of 'luxurious details such as feathers, making it a unique and sophisticated piece'.
© Dolce & Gabbana



Meanwhile, as ostrich feather explodes into mega fast fashion, an ostrich feather top can be purchased at Shein for less than US\$20.00.
© Shein

Polling results across the United Kingdom, United States, Australia and New Zealand highlight clear and material risks for brands that continue to use ostrich feathers in their products.

A strong majority of respondents (83%) agree that the farming and killing of ostriches for fashion should be banned, while 81% perceive brands that use ostrich feathers to be less ethical and sustainable.

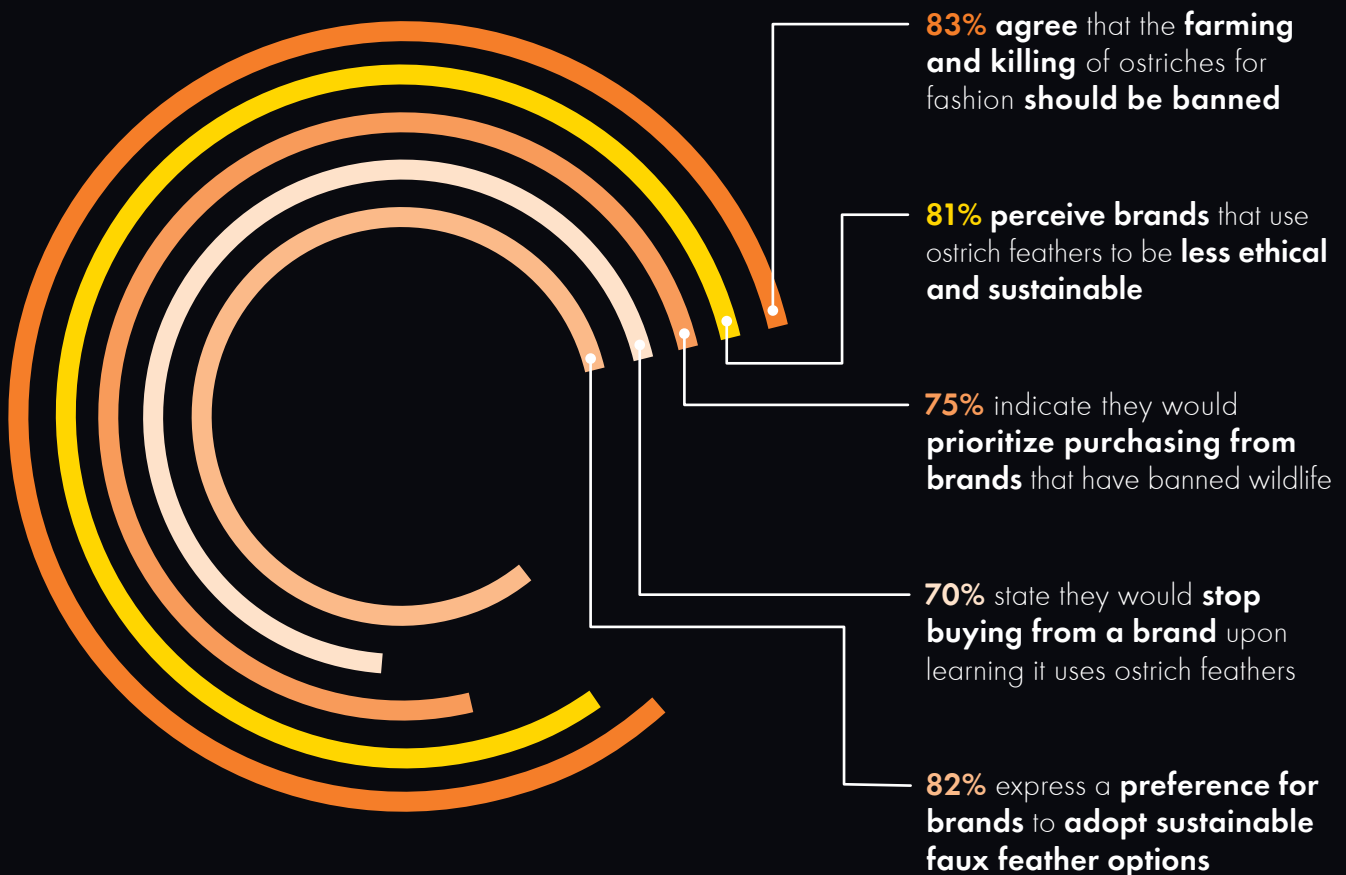
This negative sentiment translates into likely consumer behavior, with over three-quarters (75%) indicating they would prioritize purchasing from brands that have banned wildlife materials.

Notably, 70% of consumers state they would stop buying from a brand upon learning it uses ostrich feathers, demonstrating a significant potential for reputational and commercial harm.

These findings indicate a clear gap between consumer values and fashion industry practice – and that this gap is primed to close as visibility of the reality of feather farming increases among consumers. Because consumer scrutiny attaches to the retail brand rather than the upstream farm, the significant welfare issues inherent in the feather farming industry represent a live reputational liability for brands that continue to use feathers.

Encouragingly, there is clear demand for alternatives, with 82% expressing a preference for brands to adopt sustainable faux feather options where available.

Together, these findings indicate that continued use of ostrich feathers presents substantial ethical, reputational and market risks for brands, while transitioning away aligns with evolving consumer expectations and purchasing preferences.



POLICY SHIFT IS HAPPENING, INCREASING THE RISK FOR THOSE STILL USING FEATHERS

As fur continues to lose its social license following decades of awareness campaigns exposing animal cruelty, we're increasingly seeing ostrich feathers used as a fur replacement in luxury and fast fashion. This shift represents a significant and increasing risk to fashion events, brands and retailers. As public awareness increases of the conditions in which ostriches are kept, harvested and killed to sustain feather demand, it seems reasonable to predict that the acceptability of ostrich feathers will follow the same trajectory as fur.³³

Implementing a clear wildlife-friendly policy that includes a ban on ostrich feathers is therefore not only an ethical imperative, but a forward-looking risk mitigation strategy.

Positively, many luxury designers, brands and fashion events are choosing to transition away from wild animal products, implementing wildlife friendly policies and taking a leading role in driving consumers to purchase items which are more responsibly produced.

These industry leaders have chosen to introduce wildlife friendly policies prohibiting wild animal materials, which has prompted other industry leaders to follow suit, as well as inspiring creativity in material and design innovation.

Fashion industry councils are key stakeholders in addressing ethical issues, including the use of wild animal-derived materials, as they have a direct influence on standards, policies and best practices across the sector.

As representative bodies, fashion industry councils have both the opportunity and the responsibility to promote ethical practices and support sustainable innovation through guidance, education, policy development and industry-wide initiatives.

With the support of World Animal Protection and Collective Fashion Justice, there has been a rapid uptake of wildlife policies across fashion week events:

- » **Melbourne Fashion Week** introduced the first full wildlife friendly policy in 2024, banning the exhibition and promotion of all wild animal products, including ostrich feathers.³⁴
- » Shortly after in 2025, **Copenhagen Fashion Week** introduced a similar policy, taking a leading role in protecting wild animals and influencing other fashion weeks throughout Europe to implement a similar policy.³⁵
- » Within the 'Big 4' global fashion weeks, London, Milan, New York and Paris, **London Fashion Week** is leading the way with a ban on fur in 2023 followed by wild animal skins in 2025.³⁶
- » **New York Fashion Week** also introduced a fur ban at the end of 2025.³⁷
- » **In 2026, Milan Fashion Week** encouraged all designers to go fur-free following engagement with Collective Fashion Justice, Humane World and Lega Anti Vivisezione (LAV). They stopped short of a fur ban and instead ended the promotion of any fur that appears on their runways.³⁸

While the majority of fashion brands have banned fur in response to increasing public pressure and awareness over the horrific conditions animals are kept in on fur farms, we are not seeing the same level of action on ostrich feather bans.

In fact, some luxury fashion brands such as Chanel have banned wild animal skins – including ostrich skins – but not the feathers which come from the very same supply chain.

Globally, fashion brands often cite working with the South African Ostrich Business Chamber (SAOBC) as justification for their continued feather use in animal welfare policies. However, as noted, the SAOBC is an industry-created, voluntary standard with no legal requirement.

This lack of transparency over how ostrich feathers are sourced is clear in many fashion company animal welfare policies, in which ostrich feathers are permitted if:

- » they are certified by the South African Ostrich Business Chamber (SAOBC) standard (which is an industry-created body),
- » they are a 'by-product' (which they are not),
- » they come without live plucking or killing of birds (feathers can only come through one of these sources, or through cutting which – as identified by this investigation – shares most of the same welfare issues).

Despite attempted engagement highlighting the animal welfare concerns associated with ostrich feather production, major retailers including Revolve, Nordstrom, Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus continue to sell these products. These retailers lack policies to protect ostriches and fall well short of addressing cruelty in their supply chains.

Encouragingly, some retailers are leading the way in implementing policies to protect wild animals. UK based retailers Selfridges, Wolf & Badger and Debenhams Group have developed comprehensive policies banning the use of ostrich feathers. Selfridges policy states, "(w)e are committed to playing our part in keeping wild animals in the wild" and that "animal welfare abuses present a significant risk in the harvesting of bird feathers."³⁹

"Ostrich and other exotic feathers have never been permitted on Wolf & Badger, alongside fur and exotic skins. The independent designers we work with show every season that you can make distinctive, beautiful products without it."

– Wolf & Badger's representative



AN OVERVIEW OF THE EVENTS, BRANDS AND RETAILERS WITH POLICIES PROTECTING WILD ANIMALS

Fashion Week	Fur-free policy	Skin-free policy	Feather-free policy
London Fashion Week	✓	✓	✗
New York Fashion Week	✓	✗	✗
Milan Fashion Week	✗ But fur-free guidelines	✗	✗
Paris Fashion Week	✗	✗	✗
Amsterdam Fashion Week	✓	✓	✓
Australian Fashion Week	✓	✓	✓
Berlin Fashion Week	✓	✓	✓
Boston Fashion Week	✓	✗	✗
Copenhagen Fashion Week	✓	✓	✓
Helsinki Fashion Week	✓	✓	✓
Australian Fashion Festival	✓	✓	✓
Melbourne Fashion Week	✓	✓	✓

AN OVERVIEW OF THE EVENTS, BRANDS AND RETAILERS WITH POLICIES PROTECTING WILD ANIMALS (CONTINUED)

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Major luxury brand	Fur-free policy	Skin-free policy	Feather-free policy
16Arlington	✓	✓	✗
Alaïa	✓	✗	✗
Alexander McQueen	✓	✗	✗
Annie's Ibiza	✗	✗	✗
Balenciaga	✓	✗	✗
Berluti	✓	✗	✗
Celine	✗	✗	✗
Chanel	✓	✓	✗
Chloé	✓	✓	✗
Dior	✗	✗	✗
Dolce & Gabbana	✗	✗	✗
Erdem	✗	✗	✗
Givenchy	✗	✗	✗
Hermès	✗	✗	✗
Loewe	✗	✗	✗
Louis Vuitton	✗	✗	✗
Maison Margiela	✓	✗	✗
Marc Jacobs	✓	✓	✗
Marni	✗	✗	✗
Miu Miu	✓	✗	✗
Oscar de la Renta	✓	✗	✗
Stella McCartney	✓	✓	✓
Vivienne Westwood	✓	✓	✗
Yves Saint Laurent	✓	✗	✗

AN OVERVIEW OF THE EVENTS, BRANDS AND RETAILERS WITH POLICIES PROTECTING WILD ANIMALS (CONTINUED)

Multi-brand retailers	Fur-free policy	Skin-free policy	Feather-free policy
Bloomingdales	✓	✗	✗
David Jones	✓	✓	✗
Debenhams	✓	✓	✓
Farfetch	✓	✗	✗
FWRD	✗	✗	✗
lyst	✓	✗	✗
Macy's	✓	✓	✗
Marks & Spencer	✓	✗	✓
Mytheresa	✓	✓	✗
Neiman Marcus	✓	✗	✗
NET-A-PORTER	✓	✓	✗
Nordstrom	✓	✓	✗
Revolve	✗	✗	✗
Saks Fifth Avenue	✓	✗	✗
Selfridges	✓	✓	✓
THE ICONIC	✓	✗	✓
THE OUTNET	✓	✗	✗
Wolf & Badger	✓	✓	✓
Zalando	✓	✓	✓

AN OVERVIEW OF THE EVENTS, BRANDS AND RETAILERS WITH POLICIES PROTECTING WILD ANIMALS (CONTINUED)

	Mass market and fast fashion	Fur-free policy	Skin-free policy	Feather-free policy
	Anthropologie	✓	✓	✗
	ASOS	✓	✓	✓
	Bebe	✓	✓	✗
	Boohoo	✓	✓	✓
	Cotton On	✓	✓	✗
	Fashion Nova	✗	✗	✗
	Forever 21	✓	✗	✗
	Forever New	✓	✓	✓
	Free People	✗	✗	✗
	GAP	✓	✓	✗
32	Glassons	✓	✓	✓
	GUESS	✓	✓	✗
	H&M	✓	✓	✓
	MANGO	✓	✓	✗
	Missguided	✓	✓	✓*
	Nasty Gal	✓	✓	✓*
	NEXT	✓	✓	✓
	Primark	✓	✗	✗
	Pretty Little Thing	✓	✓	✓
	River Island	✓	✓	✗
	SHEIN	✓	✓	✓*
	Zara	✓	✗	✗

* These brands have an existing policy prohibiting ostrich feather, however, have yet to enforce it and were continuing to sell ostrich feather at time of writing.

INNOVATION BEYOND FEATHERS

Designers are drawn to ostrich feathers not because they originate from an animal, but because of the distinct aesthetic and performance qualities they embody. While designers increasingly use feather-like effects through traditional textile manipulation, there is an emerging opportunity to reimagine these qualities through material innovation itself.

For example, at Paris Fashion Week as part of Stella McCartney's Spring Summer 2026 collection, plant-based FEVVERS first debuted.⁴⁰ This innovative material (also the namesake of the next-gen material company producing it) is visually similar to ostrich feathers but made without animal exploitation. FEVVERS are made from "renewable botanical elements" and are naturally dyed, pushing the industry to rethink its material choices by showcasing the possibility of light, layered and movement-filled 'feathers' with no bird origin.⁴¹

Co-founder of FEVVERS, James West explains, "true luxury is defined by craftsmanship, innovation and rarity – not animal exploitation. FEVVERS is being developed to meet the expectations of a new generation of luxury consumers who want exceptional materials without the ethical compromise."

"They've got incredible movement. They're frivolous and it looks exactly like an ostrich feather," says Nicola Woollon, co-founder of FEVVERS.

Stella McCartney further explains,

"Every season, we're told that suffering is the price of fashion. I refuse to believe that... It's not only the world's first plant-based feather alternative, but it's also proof that brands who continue to use feathers are choosing cruelty over creativity."



A next generation of materials that can help to replace those derived from wildlife exploitation are desirable to consumers of luxury fashion, as noted in Collective Fashion Justice's recent report, 'Wildlife exploitation is not luxurious'.⁴² The report shares consumer insights from those with a high net worth who purchase luxury fashion goods regularly. Brands can benefit from improved perceptions as representing "modern luxury" instead of a more outdated idea of exploitative luxury, by moving beyond wildlife-derived materials and using innovative materials instead – provided that the same care and craftsmanship is included in their use. As noted by one luxury fashion consumer in this report:

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"It is important to me that [next-generation materials] feel elegant and well crafted. The overall texture, finish and execution need to reflect the same level of attention to detail I expect from high end products. If that standard is met, I would certainly find them much more appealing."

– Woman, Paris,
(46 years old)

Ethics-driven policies prohibiting the use of feathers and other wild animal materials do not constrain creativity, but in fact advance it, as noted by award-winning designer Nicklas Skovgaard.

© Collective Fashion Justice



Felder + Felder explores feather material manipulation for 'Fashion Beyond Feathers: a designers guide'.

Speaking about Copenhagen Fashion Week's (CPHFW) policy prohibiting the use of all wildlife materials, Skovgaard said this led him to "seek out substitutes that could capture the same texture, movement, and visual impact, without compromising on ethics or compliance... with platforms like CPHFW actively promoting more ethical practices, the shift away from feathers doesn't just become easier, it becomes an inspiring opportunity for growth and reinvention."

In 2024 Collective Fashion Justice developed a design guide

called 'Fashion Beyond Feathers' to support designers and industry on how best to replace feathers. The guide inspires creative material innovation while highlighting voices within the industry moving past ostrich feather use.⁴³

As more fashion weeks, councils, events and governments begin to ban wild animal-derived materials, it is imperative for brands and designers to understand the issues within the ostrich feather industry and how to embrace wildlife friendly design.

CONCLUSION

AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This investigation exposes the stark contrast between the perceptions of the ostrich feather industry and the reality experienced by the birds within the farms that supply that industry. Far from being a natural process, the commercial production of ostrich feathers is shaped by intensive farming systems, painful plucking and cutting, repeated and often rough handling of birds, and ultimately slaughter.

Claims that feathers are collected through natural molting are not supported by the evidence observed in this investigation. Instead, routine, human-controlled harvesting designed to maximize output and profit at the expense of birds and their wellbeing is the norm.

At the same time, the global fashion industry continues to drive demand for ostrich feathers. This demand is sustained by a supply chain that lacks transparency, making it difficult for brands, retailers and consumers to fully understand the origins of the materials they use and purchase.

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However, change is already underway. A growing number of designers, brands, and fashion institutions are recognizing the ethical and reputational risks associated with wild animal materials. Innovation in alternative materials demonstrates that the aesthetic qualities of feathers can be achieved without animal exploitation. Policies introduced by leading fashion weeks and retailers show that a transition away from feathers is both possible and increasingly expected.

Based on the evidence documented in this report, we conclude that the use of ostrich feathers for fashion cannot be ethically justified. The opportunity now exists for the industry to align with evolving consumer expectations, embrace innovation, and move decisively towards a future where wild animals are no longer exploited for fashion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For fashion week events

- » Adopt clear, time-bound policies to phase out and ultimately eliminate all wild animal materials, including ostrich feathers, from runways.

For retailers, brands and designers

- » Adopt clear, time-bound policies to phase out and ultimately eliminate the use of ostrich feathers and all wild animal-derived materials.
- » Ensure policies are effectively implemented and apply across all product lines, suppliers, and subsidiaries to avoid loopholes.
- » Invest in and prioritize innovative, animal-free materials that replicate or reimagine the aesthetic qualities of feathers.

For consumers

- » Consumers are encouraged to stay informed and aware, recognizing that transparency across the fashion industry remains limited, making it difficult to make fully informed choices.
- » Public awareness and support play an important role in encouraging this shift. By supporting calls for greater transparency and rejecting wild animal use, consumers can help drive industry-wide change and hold companies accountable.



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Collective
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FEVVERS debuts at Paris Fashion Week
as part of Stella McCartney's Summer
2026 show. © Stella McCartney