



The reality of commercial rabbit farming in Europe



The rabbit fur trade is the fastest growing section of the industry, yet little is publicly known about it. Many myths have been perpetuated about this industry, thus allowing the fur trade to increase the popularity of rabbit fur. Because of this, the Coalition to abolish the Fur Trade (CAFT) planned an investigation to conduct research into the industry and obtain video and photographic evidence. CAFT investigators travelled to four European countries – Denmark, Spain, Italy and France – to investigate all aspects of the trade.

It was vital to look into the rabbit farming industry as a whole: including farms which breed rabbits specifically for the fur trade, farms for rabbit meat production, slaughterhouses, dressing companies, and companies which explore the genetic breeding of rabbits for both fur and meat.

SIZE OF INDUSTRY

There appears to be no reliable figures for commercial rabbit farming today; the last figures are from 2003 when the European Food Safety Authority commissioned a scientific report into commercial rabbit farming and found that almost 857 million rabbits were slaughtered for the meat industry¹; this excludes any figures for Rex production. More than half of this figure comes from China.

A 1997 report by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations report states that rabbit fur production is “not comparable with the production of other fur species. Mink, which tops the list of species bred essentially for its fur, supplies a world total of about 25 million to 35 million pelts a year whereas rabbit pelts are estimated at one billion.” This report states that France has the largest rabbit farming industry and its annual rabbit skin production is over 70 million.² Other sources state that Spain, France and Italy are the main countries for rabbit farming.³ It is important to bear in mind that this figure is now more than likely bigger, since numbers of other furs have increased.



Spain
Rabbit farming began to increase substantially in the 1970s in Spain; this led to a notable increase in output and

in the marketing of rabbit meat. The 2003 total was 114,000 TEC (Tonnes Equivalent Carcass). The highest production region is Catalonia, where one third of all rabbit meat in Spain is produced. Other important producer regions are Aragon (14.5%), Galicia (13.8%) and Valencia (9.2%) but small local production is still present in Castilla-León, Castilla-La Mancha and Andalucía.⁴

Italy

During the 1970s, the rabbit farming industry in Italy was very much a cottage industry. Due to the demand for rabbit meat, the industry grew steadily to reach almost twice its size in 2003 (222,000 TEC); Italy consumes most of the meat it produces and imports are low. The greatest concentration and the largest farms are found in northern Italy (Veneto, Lombardia, Emilia-Romagna and Piemonte regions) where farms are large and intensive (500-1,000 does). Production is, nonetheless, substantial throughout the country: In central and southern Italy there are a large number of medium and small sized farms (100-500 does).⁵



France

In the mid 70's, the rabbit farming industry in France was more than double the previous documented statistics. According to the EFSA

report, the production in 2003 was roughly 85,000 TEC; two thirds being produced on commercial farms, and the remaining production coming from smaller, family-run farms.⁶

RABBIT BREEDS

There are two main breeds in the commercial rabbit farming industry: Rex and White rabbits (New Zealand White or California White; these will be referred to generically as White rabbits). The Rex is bred specifically for the fur and is a more velvety fur with shorter, thicker hair than the White. White rabbits have traditionally been bred primarily for the meat, and the fur was not always used; this is, however, changing due to increased demand for the fur. There is also another breed, a cross-breed of the Rex, called the Orylag only in France.

Rex

There are 2 breeds of Rex mainly bred for fur: Castor Rex (a brown colour) and Chin Rex (which is the same colour as chinchilla but with white on the underbelly; this is purposeful as the fur is cheaper to produce than chinchilla fur but looks almost the same).



The Rex has short hair; the under-hair is the same length as the over-hair (unlike the mink where the over-hair is longer) and the fur looks and feels very velvety.

During our investigation, we found that some farmers in Denmark were also breeding a white Rex. These have a dense fur and are the same colour all round the pelt. These are, however, half the price of Castor Rex and thus not so common.

A main selling point for the Rex is the fact that the colouring of the fur is so unique; since it has white on the belly of the rabbit, the skins are never identical and thus can produce a unique product. This, however, can have a downside for sales in that most auction houses want to sell a homogenous batch of skins.

The Rex rabbits are bred in intensive conditions which are described in more detail below. They are kept with the mother until 4-5 weeks old, moved to a different cage with the siblings until 7-8 weeks old and then separated from siblings to



endure a solitary short life in single cages until 8-9 months old when killed. They are kept for this amount of time so that they shed their first winter coat and thus the fur is much thicker, and hence better quality. They are kept in single cages to prevent fighting which will spoil the pelt.

The fur from the breeding stock is sometimes used depending on quality, although the meat is not normally used. Breeding animals are kept for between 2-3 years of breeding and the mothers are re-bred from 1-3 weeks after giving birth. The meat of rabbits killed at 8-9 months is often sold on for human consumption or pet food, but is most definitely a secondary product. In Denmark it is actually illegal to sell the meat for human consumption if it has not gone through a specific butchering process, so farms visited by CAFT that admitted selling the meat were doing so illegally.

One farmer interviewed by CAFT who bred Rex rabbits, also bred rabbits for the pet trade as these fetched a higher price. He said he would not be able to continue with his business without breeding for the pet trade and that there is a high demand for pets.

Rabbit fur has never been particularly popular in the fur industry and those involved in the production of Rex fur are trying to convince the rest of the industry that it is a high quality fur.

White Rabbits

The New Zealand (or California White) rabbit has traditionally been bred for the meat industry and as such is farmed slightly different from the Rex. They are also farmed intensively: kept with the mother to around 4-5 weeks old, then moved with siblings to a fattening cage, where they will stay until 10-12 weeks old when killed (they are usually 2 kg in weight by this time). They can be housed in groups as they are killed before they reach sexual maturity when they would start fighting.



White rabbits are bred more often than Rex or Orylag; the females can give birth up to 11 times a year and this is a rolling

process. The breeding doe is seen simply as a breeding machine, re-mated only a week after giving birth and often will be killed after a year, as her useful life is then over. Reasons for killing the breeding does are usually reproductive failure; sore hocks can be an indirect cause, as the pain from this will reduce her ability to breed as successfully.

Orylag

INRA (National Institute for Agricultural Research) is a French governmental organisation which started the Orylag breeding programme in 1985. They cross-bred the Rex rabbit to come up with a new breed of rabbit for commercial purposes: the Orylag. This particular breed of rabbit is considered to be a high quality fur rabbit as well as producing good quality meat. 60% of the profit comes from the fur and 40% from the meat.

A co-operative was set up to deal with this breed and within this there are 20 breeders of the Orylag in France, from which 100,000 Orylag rabbits are killed and pelted per annum.. There is no-one else breeding Orylag in the rest of the world. The co-operative has two patents covering Orylag: the fur (Orylag) and the meat (called Rex du Poitou referring to the region where the rabbits are bred). It produces an annual turnover of €3million and deals with designers such as Fendi, Dior, Chanel, Hermes, D&G, amongst others. The co-op was commended by the



International Fur Trade Federation in the UK for being able to sell the meat as well as the fur to attempt to make fur more appealing to consumers.

The co-operative oversees all stages of production, from supplying the semen to the farms for artificial insemination to accounting for, and being able to trace, the destination of every single pelt and piece of meat. Every action goes firstly through the co-op.

They liaise with the slaughterhouse and arrange collection of the rabbits. All rabbits are killed in batches of farms from which they originate; when killed a metal ID clip is put on the ear to identify it. This has the breeder number on it and all details of each batch are recorded to identify which pelt/cut of meat is from which farm.

After slaughter, the back of each pelt is stamped, which documents when the pelt was 'produced', tanned and at what temperature it was stored. If there was ever a concern about the authenticity of an Orylag pelt, one can simply check the stamp and contact the co-op. Since the Orylag co-op has the backing of the INRA (in other words, the French government), if anyone were to try to illegally reproduce Orylag skins, the INRA have the legal and financial means to prevent this.

The breeding doe will have between 5-12 young, most will have around 7. She is re-mated approximately 3-7 days later by artificial insemination. The young will stay with her until 4 weeks old, then moved into cages with their siblings until 7 weeks old (sexual maturity) then moved into single cages to prevent fighting.

The rabbits are killed at 20 weeks of age and this takes place on a rolling timescale, rather than any one particular time of year. At a slaughterhouse CAFT visited in France, 25,000 rabbits are killed each week; 4,000 of these are Orylag. The process is the same as described below.

WELFARE CONCERNS

The bare wire mesh cage system was common through out all the farms visited, apart from Denmark, and is a generally accepted form of housing for commercial rabbits. This, however, poses problems for the rabbits, both physically and psychologically.



Rabbit farm in Denmark: Hutches are not used by commercial rabbit farmers

two kept the rabbits in tiered wooden hutches. Apart from the first, these farms were not highly commercial and bred rabbits not only for fur but for meat and shows.

Rabbits bred primarily for their fur (i.e. Rex and Orylag) are caged individually once they reach sexual maturity to avoid damaging to the pelt. The accepted industry standard for these cages is approximately 60cm by 40cm with only a height of 30cm. This is roughly equivalent to the floor space of two large shoe boxes.

Rabbit farms visited by CAFT in Denmark had different methods of housing rabbits. One was the typical cage system seen in the other countries, one was an old fox fur farm and



White rabbits are housed in groups, each cage only around 100cm by 60cm and the same height as the single cages.



In bare wire mesh cages, rabbits are either kept separately to prevent fighting or crammed together, with little space to move, never mind stretch out, play, or hop. The locomotor behaviour of hopping is vital to rabbits; in cages, this is seriously impaired which can lead to problems with bone disorders. Rabbits like to be able to sit



Battery-style cages are typical throughout the industry. From top - Rex, White, Orylag

up with their ears erect; the very nature of the cage does not allow them this innate behaviour. In the worst scenario, caged rabbits can develop deformations of the vertebral column. As well as the cages denying the rabbits natural instinct to hop, the cage system also prevents the innate behaviour of digging.

The housing of the rabbits both separately and as a group both cause problems. Since rabbits are social animals, being separated from another rabbit causes immense stress and this social deprivation leads to stereotyped behaviour such as gnawing on cage bars (a common behaviour exhibited in caged animals) and over-grooming (excessively plucking one's own fur is a form of self-mutilation). Even housing the adolescent sibling rabbits together is not any better. The overcrowding of the cages leads to increased aggression and fighting. Fur-plucking and ear-biting are behavioural manifestations attributed to overcrowding.

Bare cages means boredom, which again leads to stereotypical behaviour. Most research carried out on whether rabbits benefit from cage enrichment proved that any kind of enrichment, such as gnawing sticks or even just hay, was a positive step in reducing boredom, cage gnawing and fighting⁷. Even though this is widely accepted within commercial rabbit producers, none of the farms visited during our investigation had any enrichment.

Most were entirely bare; those not bare simply had a bit of straw for nesting mothers. Even though this would be a slight improvement in terms of psychological well-being, the downside is any cage enrichment is considered to be detrimental for the hygiene of the rabbit.



The mesh flooring of the cages causes damage to the feet of the rabbit and this can result in sore hocks (ulcerative pododermatitis), leading to infections and abscesses. In 2003, research was carried out that found up to 15% of does suffered from sore hocks⁸ and other research showed up to 40% of female rabbits had paw injuries that were sufficiently serious for them to show signs of discomfort⁹.

Underneath the cages are mounds of old excrement which fall through the cage floor. These piles may only be cleaned once or



twice a year! These pits of faeces are a breeding ground for viruses, bacteria and parasites. The stench of ammonia, from the urine soaked floors, which tends to overpower any other odour in a commercial rabbit unit, can irritate the eyes of the rabbits and lead to painful infections.

Most commercial rabbit farms have lights on for most of the day (16 hours is normal), which encourages productivity in rabbits as they think it is summer when they would naturally be more active. Hence these animals will never experience fresh air or natural sunlight – until they are taken for slaughter!

BREEDING

It is common for farms to buy in breeding stock from other farms to maximize the gene pool and avoid too much in-breeding. Cards are kept on each cage to document the parents, how many young the doe gave birth to, the date of the birth and any adopted rabbits that are in with the litter (the adopted kit will sometimes have a clip placed on the ear to help differentiate).

Natural mating is only used on a minority of farms because it is considered time-consuming, therefore artificial insemination is more commonly used. The female rabbit is held on her back to

inseminate her; this can cause high levels of stress, vaginal perforations and genital bacterial infections.¹⁰



A few days old, these kits are born to be turned into fur coats

On most farms, the mothers are kept separated from their kits and allowed into the nursing area once a day to feed them. Whilst the mothers

would nurse the kits infrequently in the wild, the fact that she is not in control of when she can nurse her babies will cause stress. When the mother is under stress she may also eat her young.

GENETIC MANIPULATION

One business CAFT visited in Spain concerned themselves with improving the genetic breeding of Rex and White rabbits to maximize fur and meat production. They have a closed population of rabbits here: whilst no new rabbits are brought in, they do sell onto other farms to provide a 'quality stock' of rabbit. They also have other farms themselves where they would send rabbits off for fattening before slaughter.

This farm use natural methods of breeding so they know which the father is to be able to have a complete picture of the genes. The rabbits which are chosen for breeding are tattooed on the ear to identify them and they do this a month after they have been weaned. The identity number allows the farm to trace back 5 generations and this serves to avoid interbreeding.

MORTALITY

The mortality rate for both Rex and white rabbits is usually between 10-15%¹¹ and the farms account for this loss without affecting their profit margin. This is the highest mortality rate documented amongst any commercial animal farming, with recorded levels of 5% for ducks and 11% for pigs.¹² At one farm in Spain, CAFT investigators were told that the mortality rate in Spanish rabbit farms can be up to 25%! It is common for kits to die during the lactation period; they also die from respiratory and enteric infections as well as other diseases specified below.

The Orylag has a higher mortality rate - 25-30% - than rabbits bred traditionally for meat. The reason given to CAFT for this was that the rabbits live longer so there is a greater chance of them dying from illness. This is questionable, however, as the mortality rate for Rex rabbits is the same as for White rabbits (10-15%) yet Rex are killed at a much older age than Orylag.

TRANSPORT TO SLAUGHTER



Rabbits are crated and sent by lorry to the slaughterhouse

rabbits are tightly packed in; viruses can be easily spread and poor ventilation causes respiratory failure. Broken bones and traumatic lesions are also common, due to bad handling.

SLAUGHTER

Aside from the farms, in Spain, France and Italy there are specific rabbit slaughterhouses. These have been in business for many years as commercial rabbit farming has always been prevalent in these countries. The farmer will get a set price (which fluctuates according to market price) for each rabbit as a whole and extra revenue is now created from the sale of the rabbit skins which have become a profitable part of the rabbit meat industry.



A farmer demonstrates how he stuns Rex rabbits with a blow to the head

the blood drained. They are stunned either by a heavy blow to the back of the head with a stick (on smaller farms) or by electrocution (on larger farms or at commercial slaughterhouses). The process from here is similar to that with fox and mink. Fat is scraped from the skin and the skins are then put into a drum filled with sawdust to remove any excess fat from the skins and then dried out on boards in ventilated rooms.

Some farmers, where there was more of a rabbit farming infrastructure, would send the rabbits to specific rabbit slaughterhouses. The slaughterhouses would be paid more to handle the pelts with more care as they are worth more than white rabbit skins. The Rex rabbit can be up to 4 kg in weight when slaughtered; this is heavier than the white rabbits (approx 2 kg in weight) so this factor must also be taken into consideration when killed at a slaughterhouse.

It is very common for rabbits to die en route to slaughter and rates as high as 7 or 8% have been reported¹³. This is often due to the way the

Rex
Most of the Rex farms visited carried out the slaughter themselves, just twice a year (early winter and the end of winter). The rabbits are killed by having their throats slit and

White Rabbits

White rabbits are normally sent to a slaughterhouse, where the animals are stunned, hung up on hooks and have their throats slit. They are carried on a conveyor belt system (not unlike any other slaughterhouse set up); they are bled, have their skins removed and have their innards removed and then dismembered and packaged for meat consumption. The pelts are then either frozen and shipped to the customer or delivered fresh and salted to the dressers.

One rabbit farm in Italy visited by CAFT had its own slaughterhouse on site, which the farmer claimed operated in line with EU standards as the meat was sold commercially. There was no other slaughterhouse close by so in order to avoid paying higher prices to send the rabbits further to a slaughterhouse, the farmer decided to set up his own. Five people worked on this assembly line and it resembled other slaughterhouses CAFT visited. They sold the pelts fresh to a dresser company in the locality and these were picked up directly after slaughtering.

At a slaughterhouse in Spain infiltrated by CAFT, at which 9,000 rabbits

were killed each day, hundreds of animals were held in crates piled eight high in view of those being slaughtered.



All these animals could see, smell and hear the killing of their fellow creatures. Most rabbits were covered in the urine and faeces of those rabbits stacked above them in the crate. The efficient production line was the primary concern there; the rabbit's welfare was hardly considered.



The rabbits were stunned with an electrical device before having their throats slit. Some were clearly still alive as they

bled to death, raising their heads and squealing as they passed along the production line.

"Rabbits are relatively silent creatures, and will hardly ever use audible vocalisations. Such vocalisations are uttered under conditions of extreme distress only."





Orylag rabbits having their furs ripped off

The rabbits whose throats were/had being/been slit were extremely vocal and one could clearly hear their squeals of distress.

*This further confirms that they were absolutely alive, conscious and aware whilst they were being killed.*¹⁴

When workers had a break, one rabbit who had been stunned was left hanging for ten minutes until work resumed and only then did she have her throat slit.



Here's the rest of your fur coat: The skinned bodies of Orylag rabbits

Live rabbits were left next to the stunning machine literally centimetres from their hanging counterparts.

European legislation regarding the slaughter of animals is clear that *"stunning must not be carried out unless it is possible to bleed the animals immediately afterwards"*¹⁵. The Directive, applicable to all European countries states:

*"For animals which have been stunned, bleeding must be started as soon as possible after stunning and be carried out in such a way as to bring about rapid, profuse and complete bleeding. In any event, the bleeding must be carried out before the animal regains consciousness."*¹⁶

In 2003 the Farm Animal Welfare Council, an independent advisory body established by the UK government, published its 'Report on the Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing'. Although specifically relating to 'red meat animals' (i.e. not rabbits), it includes the following:

*"Electrical head only stunning of animals is reversible and any delay in bleeding the animal has serious welfare implications. The scientific evidence supports the recommendation that stun to bleed intervals should not exceed 15 seconds."*¹⁷

DRESSERS

An important part of the rabbit fur industry is the dressing process. CAFT visited several dressers and these companies make money from taking the raw skins (frozen or salted) from slaughterhouses and making them sellable.

The dressing plants usually work with thousands of skins at any one time. Even though furs from rabbits under 6 months of age are generally not classed as good quality pelts from a furrier's point of view, the work that the dressers do makes fur from juvenile rabbits acceptable to use. The better the work done by the dressers, the better quality end product of fur the customer will have.



The dressers buy in skins¹⁸, usually salted or frozen to prevent the skins rotting, and start the process: the skins are put into a machine (or

done by hand) to have all the fat taken from them, dried out, soaked and stretched out on boards to increase their size and dried out again. Then they will be coloured, patterned or shaven depending on customer requests; the pelts can be put through many processes to achieve the desired effect, thus increasing the price to the customer. One example shown to investigators were skins that had been treated with acid to produce a ridged effect, similar to that of karakul lamb.

Quite often the skins are sewn into plates (an average plate will be 60cm x 120cm?) for sale. If the customer desires though, they will be sold as individual skins; the emphasis is very much on what the customer wants.

One dresser in Spain, visited by CAFT, had 100,000 skins in the factory at any one time and there would be 30,000 skins going through the drying process at all times. This factory had approximately 30 workers, most of whom on the shop floor were immigrant workers. Parts of the factory were particularly noisy and the air was full of dust from the processes undertaken, but none of the workers were seen to be wearing masks or ear protection.



Fur being used for Gucci boots

CAFT also visited a dresser's in Italy during spring 2007 which was preparing for the next season and at that time were working with 10,000 skins a week. This

particular dresser supplied designers such as Cavalli and Gucci and had been printing a boot design on the actual fur for Gucci.



This lorry, packed with frozen pelts, was sent straight to China from Italy

In Italy investigators visited a company whose only work with rabbit fur was to collect rabbit skins from slaughterhouses in the region and export them to China. They would deal with 70-80,000 pelts a week on average,

but this number can be between 60,000 and 200,000 a week, depending on the slaughterhouses. The slaughterhouse pays the farmer for the whole rabbit and then sells different parts onto different businesses. The slaughterhouse charges 10-15 cents per pelt; this was the acknowledged market price at the time. It will fluctuate between these boundaries according to the rabbit fur market. When customers are paying the lower price this company pays the lowest price it can to the slaughterhouse. At the time of the investigation, the price was low and the company was getting 25 cents per pelt. All of the rabbit pelts were being sold on to buyers in China; they are totally unworked and have only been collected from slaughterhouses and frozen to preserve the pelt. They are then shipped to China in refrigerated lorries.

This company has been collecting rabbit pelts for approximately 50 years. Before there was a large demand for the fur, the pelts would be shaved and the fur sold separately (see below).



FUR AS WASTE PRODUCT?

There is a myth perpetuated by the fur industry that rabbit fur would simply be thrown away if they did not use it for clothing, etc. Whilst some farmers have reported throwing the fur away in the past, it was not always the case. Like all animal farming industries, they will often utilise every last piece of the animal to maximise profits and rabbit farming is no different.

Where fur from rabbits has not been thrown away, historically it has been used as fertiliser, glue or for felting in hats. France has always exported (and imported, though on a smaller scale) hundreds of tonnes annually of rabbit hair for such purposes, in the 1990s this was priced in the region of just under €20 per kilo.[?]

One farmer in Italy told CAFT how he used to sell the rabbit skins to a company who dealt in angora. They would shave the fur from the skins and then mix the white rabbit fur with angora fur to sell as pure angora fur.

FINANCIAL

The price of rabbit meat varies in each country but can cost between €4-8 (price paid per rabbit). In Spain, one worker told CAFT that the price of rabbit



meat has not increased over the last 5 years, but the costs associated with producing the meat has. This means that without the profit now to be found in the sale of the fur, many farms would have had to close down.

In Italy, the pelts from the White rabbits cost between 10-15 cents undressed but when dressed they can be sold for double that. In Spain, however, the price of the skins were between 50 cents and €1. If additional work (such as colouring, printing, cutting in patterns, etc) is done with the pelts, they can be sold for up to €3 each. Most dressing companies will deal with tens of thousands of skins each week. In Italy, there are a handful of very large companies who import raw pelts and these companies basically set the price and the smaller companies have to go along with this.

The price of the Rex fur is considerably higher; in the region of €30. These will often be sold through auction houses, such as Copenhagen Fur Centre and Finnish Fur Sales (Helsinki), although they can be sold locally if the infrastructure of the area allows for this.

The Orylag co-op never sell via the auction houses as they prefer to set the price themselves and they want to be able to control the destination of the pelts, through dealing directly with designers and furriers. Each pelt is worth between €25-€70, depending on grade and approximately 20-25 skins are needed for an average sized jacket.

CHINESE INDUSTRY

All of the countries visited made mention of the fact of the Chinese industry is growing enormously and is now dwarfing rabbit production in any other country. As a result many European businesses are closing down or relocating to China where production costs are much cheaper. There is very much a feeling that the quality of rabbit fur coming from China is lower than European-produced fur, but the cost difference is the predominant factor in keeping the industry going. Many companies who just want to use fur on trim are not too concerned about having high quality fur and will therefore use Chinese rabbit fur.

There are few environmental laws in China, which means that costs of processing and production are so much cheaper. It is common for raw pelts to be shipped to China for processing then back to the source country for ongoing production and there are businesses that exist just to do exactly this! Chinese companies are buying the pelts at their cheapest, i.e. raw and unprocessed, and making use of the cheap labour costs to dress the furs and sell them on. They will even take damaged pelts and repair them rather than throwing them away as the labour costs can allow for this. It is, in part, due to the demand from China for the furs that has pushed the price of the pelt up.

One Italian company visited by CAFT talked about Benetton and how it now uses Chinese fur for its products as it wants to pay low prices. It wants to sell at the lowest price possible so will pay as little as possible for materials. Investigators were told that Benetton is such a big customer in Italy that using Chinese products is taking a significant amount of business away from Italy.

INCREASED POPULARITY OF RABBIT FUR

It was acknowledged by most people CAFT investigators spoke to that the increased popularity of rabbit fur is due to the cheap production and the resulting ability to experiment more with it. As other animal furs are more expensive companies are less willing to experiment with shaving, cutting, dying etc. Being able to experiment with rabbit furs has meant that designers feel more confident to do this now with other furs. Some dressers were even manipulating the White skins to try to emulate Rex skins in order to fetch a higher price. So much can be done to alter the appearance of White rabbit fur that it can actually be passed off as another fur, for example, Karakul lamb.

A shop selling fur will not always know the origin of that fur, whether it comes from White rabbits, Rex rabbits or a totally different animal. It was once the case that rabbit fur was always cheap but nowadays price is no indicator; the more work a dresser carries out with rabbit pelts, the more expensive the end product will be.



Orylag fur is also used to make toys

It is due to the dressing part of the industry that has enabled rabbit fur to become a profitable element of the commercial rabbit farming industry. Whilst rabbit fur has always been marketed as a by-product of the rabbit meat trade, due to the dressing industry making rabbit fur profitable, the fur can no longer be considered simply a waste product.

CONCLUSION

Our investigation has revealed that the breeding and killing of rabbits for their fur is just as cruel as other parts of the fur trade. The natural habits and welfare needs of the rabbits are not taken into consideration by the farmer, who is only concerned about maximising profits. As a result, rabbits are confined to the same kind of factory farming system as egg-laying hens, pigs, mink and other animals.

What has been surprising about rabbit farming is that very few investigations have been carried out into it by animal protection organisations. Notable exceptions are the 2006 investigation into rabbit farms in Portugal by ANIMAL²⁰ and the 2007 Vier Pforten exposé of the rabbit meat industry in Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia and other countries²¹. The lack of investigations has meant that there have been few calls for a ban on the factory farming of rabbits. There have also been fewer scientific studies into the welfare problems of rabbit farming compared to other intensive farming systems.

It is also important to highlight the world-wide public outrage at the killing of cats and dogs in Asian countries. These animals are killed for their fur, but also their meat; the issue of whether the fur or the meat is the primary product is never an issue here. Considering rabbits are very popular companion animals in the UK and many other countries worldwide, it is strange that rabbits are not considered in the same light as cats and dogs!



It can take up to 25 or more rabbits to make a jacket

Accurate figures regarding the number of rabbits killed for their fur are still hard to come by. This is being made increasingly difficult by the huge growth of rabbit farming in China and the increase in the use of furs from White rabbits, traditionally bred primarily for meat. The number is certainly in the tens, if not hundreds, of millions.

CAFT works to end the fur trade, a trade where animals are slaughtered to satisfy the whims of the fashion industry. The results of our investigation will hopefully ensure that those companies that have swallowed the myths of the fur trade and continue to sell rabbit fur will cease to do so and that consumers will also shun rabbit fur products as so many have with the furs of mink, fox, etc.

We also hope that our findings will encourage people to think about the cruelties of the meat industry, where animals are caged in the same intensive conditions and slaughtered to satisfy a desire for their flesh. We do not need the furs of other animals to keep warm; neither do we need their flesh for a healthy and satisfying diet.

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- ¹¹ This is the figure given by many farmers interviewed but an industry report (see note 5) gives the figure to be as high as 30%!
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- ¹⁴ *Comments on Photographs and Footage Submitted by CAFT* Colleen McDuling, BSc (Med)(Hons), MSc (Med. Sc.), Animal Behaviourist, Specialist in the Biology and Behaviour of Lagomorpha and Rodentia
- ¹⁵ Council Directive 93/119/EC of 22 December 1993 on the protection of animals at the time of slaughter or killing. Annex C
- ¹⁶ *ibid*; Annex D
- ¹⁷ Report on the Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing. Part 1: Red Meat Animals. Farm Animal Welfare Council, 2003, page 37
- ¹⁸ The dressers do not necessarily buy from the same country; in Italy one dresser’s was buying pelts from Spain and Poland as they could get a cheaper price.
- ¹⁹ see 2, chapter 8.
- ²⁰ www.animal.org.pt
- ²¹ www.vierpfoten.org



