



OPEN LETTER

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The luxury fashion industry and the benefits of using exotic leathers

Dear Luxury CEO,

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is a global membership organization that brings together governments and civil society to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable. It harnesses the experience, resources, and reach of its 1,400 Member organisations and the input of nearly 17,000 experts. This diversity and vast expertise makes IUCN the global authority on the status of the natural world and the measures needed to safeguard it. IUCN has observer status at the United Nations and plays a key role in several international conventions on nature conservation and biodiversity.

Within the IUCN, the Species Survival Commission is a science-based network of more than 9,600 volunteer experts, distributed in 164 groups in 174 countries, all working together towards achieving the vision of *"A just world that values and conserves nature through positive action to reduce the loss of diversity of life on earth"*. Some of SSC's groups address conservation issues related to plants, fungi or animals, while others focus on issues such as reintroduction of species into former habitats, wildlife health, climate change or sustainable use of natural resources and biodiversity.

We write to you to express our concern about the decisions taken by some luxury fashion groups to ban or cease to use the skins of wild animals, such as crocodiles, alligators, snakes, and lizards. Firstly, the scientific evidence shows that the trade in those skins is in fact sustainable, contributes to wildlife conservation and recovery, and supports the livelihood of local communities. Secondly, there has been a concerted push to ban exotic skin use due to misinformation about COVID19 transmission. There is no evidence, however, that reptiles transmit zoonotic diseases like coronaviruses. We are constantly working on developing the best evidence base to support public policies regarding the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, but we are afraid that data do not support decisions made by luxury fashion brands to stop using precious skins.

The benefits that trade in precious skins and exotic leathers provide to nature and people, as well as to the adoption of UN Sustainable Development Goals, are supported by scientific evidence. This trade is one of the great conservation success stories of our time. Species once close to extinction have recovered and are now subject to meticulous management.

The demand from luxury brands for reptile skins has indirectly built this industry into what it is today. Some companies may not have realized and foreseen these benefits, but their involvement fuelled



the conservation actions that were and still are needed. We are now experiencing the negative consequences of luxury fashion companies abandoning the use of these raw materials, which extend through the supply chains to local communities unable to adapt to change.

While improvements can and will continue to be made in supply chains, the reptile skin trade today is supporting and encouraging sophisticated and innovative science-based management programs, that provide incentives for people to protect the species they rely on for their income and livelihoods. Legal trade also encourages people to value and protect natural habitats and ecosystems, rather than converting them to intensive forms of land use. This has the knock-on effect of conserving the rest of biodiversity and ecosystem services that those habitats offer.

The legal trade provides sustainable livelihoods for millions of people around the planet, many of them impoverished and living in remote areas, with few if any alternatives for a cash income. The meat of reptiles used for leather is utilised by people, providing an important source of protein and food security. This is the very humanitarian problem the UN Sustainable Development Goals encourages corporations to address. This trade, already dependent on the engagement of luxury fashion brands, provides livelihood security in times of economic uncertainty and resource volatility, and buffers rural people against the looming threat of climate change.

As corporations become increasingly conscious and responsible about sourcing, begin to seek compliance with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and move towards net positive sourcing practices for biodiversity, we strongly encourage the luxury fashion industry to consider the benefits that this trade generates in favour of species, ecosystems and people. The industry would thus ensure that sourcing decisions are judged in their entirety as part of holistic and evidence-based Corporate Responsibility policies.

The IUCN SSC works closely with many luxury fashion groups to ensure sustainable trade in reptile leather. We look forward to working with you to redouble our efforts to promote evidence-based decision-making and the immense benefits that you generate.

Sincerely,

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