



1 February 2007 15:54

- [Home](#)
- > [News](#)
- > [UK](#)
- > [This Britain](#)

Madonna & the curse of chinchilla: What she should know about *that* coat

When she stepped outside to face the paparazzi in London last week, the singer might have known she was walking into a storm of protest about her £35,000 chinchilla coat. But could she have known the suffering that went into keeping her warm? We think she should be told, says Jonathan Owen

Published: 10 December 2006

Stepping out in London's Mayfair last week, Madonna had no reason to know she was about to walk into a new scandal. Still reeling from the row over her adoption of a baby boy from Africa, the 48-year-old, who started her career as the self-styled Material Girl of pop, was pictured smiling and happy as she left a restaurant with her husband, film producer Guy Ritchie.

But trouble was lurking. Pictures of her in a £35,000 chinchilla fur coat were flashed to newspapers and magazines around the world, provoking a storm of protest. Now animal campaigners are calling for a boycott of her music.

The coat - and thousands like it - represents the end product of a macabre trade. More than 40 animals were killed to make the latest addition to Madonna's wardrobe, but hundreds of thousands are bred on factory-style farms, then killed by strangulation or electrocution, campaigners claim.

"Madonna is showing herself up to be shallow and selfish and lacking in all compassion which, particularly in this season of goodwill, is regrettable," said Mark Glover from Respect for Animals. "The message she's sending out to her fans is contemptible and people should stop buying her albums until she stops wearing fur."

Anita Singh of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta) said: "It is ironic that just weeks after struggling to prove she has a heart, adopting a child from Malawi, she comes out in support of one of the most violent industries on the planet. This is an industry responsible for bludgeoning, strangling, gassing and electrocuting small, defenceless animals for the sake of fashion.

"It is unfortunate for the millions of defenceless animals trapped on fur farms that have to suffer the horrific consequences for her vanity and that of others like her."

Chinchillas are shy, intelligent animals that can live for up to 15 years in the wild and are fast becoming one of Britain's best-loved pets. Fur farming has been banned in Britain since 2003, after heavy anti-fur campaigns in the Nineties, but chinchilla furs are still imported.

Mr Glover added: "The hypocrisy is perverse that, while the means of production is illegal, people are still able to buy and

sell fur."

Photographs from an investigation by Peta depict the cruelty. Investigators got into a chinchilla farm in America (a major exporter) and saw babies taken from their mothers and put into "growing" rooms, with hundreds of chinchillas in small cages on top of each other.

Campaigners say many die from poor diets and neglect before they can be killed for their fur, and that animals often survive electrocution and are still alive when spread-eagled and skinned. Neck-breaking, described as "cervical dislocation" by furriers, and electrocution are the favoured killing methods. But a spokesman for US-based Empress Chinchilla Breeders Cooperative claimed: "Our members take better care of their chinchillas than they probably do their families. This is one pampered and cared-for animal. In the summer, they are kept in air-conditioned barns with fans for fresh air. In the winter, the barns are heated."

In Croatia, undercover investigator Jean Hubert, of the French animal welfare group One Voice, was forced to watch as a chinchilla took almost two minutes to die. "I saw a farmer electrocute a chinchilla in front of me by wiring it to a domestic power socket," he said. "It was awful. The animal kept twitching and as he was skinning it he kept prodding it to check it was dead. The animals are skinned immediately afterwards, and there will always be a proportion skinned while still alive."

The fur of the giant rodents, native to South America, is considered the softest in the world and is 30 times finer than human hair. The demand for their fur almost wiped them out and they are now endangered in the wild.

When the anti-fur movement was at its height, in the late Eighties and early Nineties, Madonna wore anti-fur T-shirts in public. But her interest soon waned and in 2001 she was pictured in a £1,000 fox fur hat. A year later, she was seen in a coat that campaigners claimed was made from the pelts of unborn lambs. Ironically, this latest scandal comes only days after Madonna announced that she will be designing clothes for H&M, a high street chain that has a policy of not using fur.

The star's long-time publicist, Barbara Charone, declined to comment but a friend, the vegetarian fashion designer Stella McCartney, said: "There's nothing fashionable about a dead animal that has been cruelly killed just because some people think it looks cool to wear."

Sales of fur clothing are up 30 per cent on two years ago, with fur products worth £40m imported every year in a market worth an estimated £500m in the UK. Figures from HM Customs and Revenue show that approximately 1,000 tons of fur are imported annually. The global market for fur is almost £7bn.

The furore over Kate Moss wearing fur shows no sign of fading. Campaigners report tens of thousands of hits on a website attacking the latest advertising campaign that she has fronted for Burberry. From tomorrow, an activist dressed as a knight with a "Death for Sale" banner will stand outside the flagship store in Regent Street, London. Burberry has distanced itself from Moss, saying: "Burberry has never contracted Kate, or any other model, to be the 'face' of Burberry. Kate, like other models, works for Burberry on specific contracts."

The fur industry is fighting back, citing record sales figures and accusing animal rights campaigners of picking on poor examples of fur farms, claiming "the fur trade has standards of animal husbandry as high and in many cases higher than most".

Frank Zilberkweit, vice chairman of the British Fur Traders Association, said: "If you go around the world you'll find bad practice, but it doesn't mean the whole industry is tainted. The problem was that our products were incorrectly packaged for years, but we've reinvented fur. It is fashionable and modern and the age of our clientele is going down. Now we have lots of ladies in their twenties coming in."

"Eco-fur" is the latest tactic being used to bring fur back into the mainstream. It is being promoted by the company Soulfurs that recently began importing possum fur from New Zealand, where millions of animals are culled annually. Interior designers such as Nicky Haslam are already using its possum fur. A spokesman for the company said: "This is a beautiful, luxury fur product that is also eco-friendly. Just like any other animal-sourced product, fur can be a great material as long as it is sourced ethically from a sustainable source."

Possums are an official pest in New Zealand, where tens of millions have rampaged through much of the natural vegetation. They are subject to an ongoing eradication programme.

Animal campaigners have been swift to condemn this. Anita Singh of Peta said: "Possum are poisoned, shot and cruelly trapped in steel-jaw leghold traps, a device so cruel it has been banned in the UK. Furs are about as eco-friendly as dumping oil in the sea. This is a poor excuse for ripping fur from animals' backs for profit."

Robyn Kippenberger, the national chief executive of the RSPCA in New Zealand, warned: "Unless manufacturers can guarantee the provenance of their fur and skins, in that they have been procured by humane methods, we do not support the killing of possums for their fur. We believe the industry is blurring the issue by relying on the possum 'pest' status to condone inhumane practices when other more humane methods are readily available to traders."

Dan Lonergan, from trendy furniture shop Gothum in Notting Hill, London, which sells possum throws at £1,500 each, is

unrepentant. "Most people are going to find it acceptable," he said. "It is not inhumane or environmentally incorrect; it is putting something to good use that's being killed anyway."

Imports of fake fur dropped from £3m in 2002 to £1m in 2006. Last year, 88,000kg of mink worth £16m came into the UK.

The retail world remains divided. Topshop and Marks & Spencer will not sell fur. But Harrods is selling fur again, as is the high street shop Joseph.

Chrissie Hynde, the latest celebrity to join the campaign against cruelly produced fur, said: "Why would you pay someone to torture an animal? That's the bottom line, that's what it comes down to. People cannot pretend they don't know where fur comes from."

Supermodel Challenge: 10 questions for Kate Moss

Last week, we challenged Kate Moss to speak against cruelly harvested fur, as the face of fur-promoting luxury brands and as the model most likely to reverse its increasing popularity. Here, animal welfare campaigners, experts and fellow fashionistas ask her to stand beside designer Stella McCartney, the singer Chrissie Hynde, and General Peter Davies CB, director general of the World Society for the Protection of Animals, who all back the 'loS' campaign.

1. 'There's nothing fashionable about a dead animal that has been cruelly killed just because some people think it looks cool to wear.' Do you agree?

Stella McCartney, designer

2. 'You have joined Topshop, which has an admirable policy against the sale of fur. Will you be supporting this policy by personal example?'

Major General Peter Davies CB, director general, World Society for the Protection of Animals

3. 'How do you explain that you're OK with sending a message to your fans that cruelty to animals is acceptable?'

Anita Singh, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

4. 'How do you feel about others copying you by wearing fur and in turn fuelling the brutal and unnecessary trade?'

Jackie Ballard, director general, RSPCA

5. 'How do you sleep at night, propping up a morally bankrupt and cruel industry?'

Mark Glover, director, Respect for Animals

6. 'Where's the fashion and where's the fun in wearing a dead animal?'

Wendy Turner-Webster, actress

7. 'Would you consider wearing fur that has come from cats or dogs?'

Struan Stevenson, MEP

8. 'Do you know whether the fur you're wearing is from an endangered species or not?'

Chris Loades, Fauna & Flora International

9. 'Why would you buy something where you knew something was tortured?'

Chrissie Hynde, singer

10. 'If this really is an issue that people are passionate about then it is up to them to make a stand against the industry and not buy fur in any shape or form.' Do you agree?

Lady Heather Mills-McCartney

Fur Campaign: What we are demanding

1. An end to the use of fur from animals which are cruelly treated, for example the two million cats and dogs raised in poor conditions for their fur in China or seals that are inhumanely slaughtered.

2. A halt to the practice of farming animals taken from the wild, such as foxes and mink, which are denied the basic freedoms they need and suffer distress when killed.

3. We want a universal system of labelling for fur, which clearly states its type and origin.

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