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'IoS' fur campaign: Before you slip into your mink, read this

The actress Sharon Stone is the latest celebrity to be photographed in fur. If she knew what Jonathan Owen has discovered about mink farms in Norway, we think she would join the growing support for our campaign

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The stench of ammonia filled the air. Trees and bushes downwind of the farm were covered in thick moss - feeding off the nutrients carried downwind from the animals' waste.

As an *Independent on Sunday* investigator drew nearer to the collection of sheds and dilapidated farm machinery at a clearing in Norway, it was plain that the conditions at this mink farm rarely come under scrutiny. It was a scene of squalor, just days before the animals were to be skinned for sale as evening wear.

Animal welfare campaigners question whether people who buy fur would still do so if they saw the conditions under which the animals live, and die.

Kate Moss and Madonna have come under fire for wearing animal furs. Yesterday, Sharon Stone became the latest celebrity fur wearer to attract the attentions of animal rights activists. The 48-year-old Hollywood actress was photographed wearing a full-length mink coat during a visit to Norway last week, where she attended a Nobel banquet at Oslo's Grand Hotel.

A spokeswoman for the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta) condemned the star, saying: "Sharon craves attention, any kind of attention. She likely flaunts fur to ensure her photo makes the papers."

The campaigners point out that more than 60 mink would have been killed to make a coat like the one Stone was wearing.

The conditions in which those animals may well have lived before they were gassed, strangled or electrocuted are not pleasant. At the farm near Oslo we found a collection of five long sheds about three yards wide and 50 yards long. The sheds were crammed with animals. Cages were stacked next to each other on each side with just a narrow walkway in the middle. The cages were tiny - about 18 by 40 inches - and did not have any bedding material, just an open mesh bottom.

Some of them had up to four animals in each one, maddening for animals such as mink, which are highly territorial. Mink in the wild

like to roam along waterways, something they are unable to do in the confines of a cage. Furriers stress that the animals they farm are 200 generations removed from their wild ancestors.

While the place was called a farm, many are really more like animal warehouses, where the animals are there for one reason only - to be killed for their coats.

The floor below each row of cages was piled with excrement, up to half a yard deep in places. There was mess and rubbish everywhere. Cages were covered in old food and fur and the corrugated iron roof was rusting and full of holes.

The smell inside was nothing like a normal farm smell, bad enough to induce gagging. All around was the sound of mink biting on the bars of their cages, the same cages shaking. Any movement made the cage rattle and the animals claws scrape constantly on the bars that they perch on. Other animals jump around, repeating the same movements over and over again.

There was no evidence of food. The mink had water troughs but there had been a frost that morning and some of them were still frozen over.

Some of the animals just lay there; they'd had enough. In one dimly lit cage in a corner of the shed was a large mink. Hanging down from the wire mesh of the bottom of its cage was a mixture of rotting food, excrement and bits of fur.

The animal could barely move; it seemed to have resigned itself to its fate and lay still, its eyes swollen from the ammonia fumes from its urine and faeces and a large open wound on its head.

Fur farmers tend to be secretive about exactly where their pelts end up. The fur from the animals seen by this newspaper will already be in the system and will end up being sold on the open market next year. Last year, 86 tons of mink worth £16m came into the UK.

Despite investigations highlighting appalling conditions in some fur farms, furriers claim that the industry self-regulates successfully and operates within the law.

The fur industry accuses animal rights campaigners of picking on the worst examples, claiming "the fur trade has standards of animal husbandry as high and in many cases higher than most".

Although fur farming has been banned in Britain since 2003, following anti-fur campaigns in the 1990s, it is still legal to buy mink and the UK remains a significant importer and exporter of fur.

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."

Sales of fur clothing are up 30 per cent from 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.

And as the imports increase, debate about the buying and wearing of real fur grows more intense.

Mark Glover, director of Respect for Animals, said: "The hypocrisy is perverse that, while the means of production are illegal, people are still able to buy and sell fur." There are daily demonstrations planned to take place outside Harrods and Burberry this week. The two stores continue to sell fur. Following this newspaper's campaign, the International Fur Trade Federation announced plans last week to launch an "origin assured" label this month that will state that the fur comes from a country where national or local regulations or standards governing fur production are in force.

More high-profile public figures are speaking out against the wearing of fur. Actress Amanda Holden, was blunt last week: "Don't wear it! I was in Harrods standing behind a woman on the escalator who was wearing an entire animal on her back. I didn't even want to stand behind her."

Question Time: Campaigners' challenge to Kate Moss

Two weeks ago we challenged Kate Moss to speak against cruelly harvested fur. Her spokesman said 'No comment' when we posed the following questions from animal welfare campaigners and fellow fashionistas.

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?'

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

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

Mark Glover, director, Respect for Animals

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

Struan Stevenson MEP

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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