

THE CASE AGAINST FUR FACTORY FARMING

Executive summary



Most fur sold globally is from farmed animals, with Europe and China being the largest producers. Since the first edition of this report was published, global fur production has been falling year-on-year, and there have been substantial reductions since 2020 as a result of mink culls in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, an estimated **23 million mink, 12 million foxes and 9 million raccoon dogs were reared and killed for their fur.**

The COVID-19 pandemic is believed to have originated in red foxes, raccoon dogs and/or hog badgers sold for food in the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan around November 2019. This pandemic caused the reported deaths of more than 6.5 million people by October 2022. The disease was identified in European fur farms as early as April 2020, and the virus spread to hundreds of mink farms, with new variants being transmitted back to humans. Farming mink, foxes and raccoon dogs represents a substantial, and unpredictable, zoonotic hazard.

While fur animals are included in general EU legislation on animal welfare, transport and slaughter, there is no detailed species-specific EU legislation setting welfare standards for animals farmed for fur. Serious concerns about the welfare of animals farmed for fur were highlighted in the 1999 Council of Europe *Recommendation Concerning Fur Animals* and the 2001 report of the Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare. Species farmed for their fur are essentially wild animals and, as such, not suited to captivity, least of all in small cages.

Recent scientific studies add further weight to the substantial body of evidence presented in the 2015 edition of this report that demonstrated that the needs of mink and foxes, and now raccoon dogs, are not met in current housing systems, and cannot be met in any commercial housing system used by the fur industry.

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Mink, foxes and raccoon dogs used for fur production are not domesticated

Domestication is an evolutionary process by which a population of animals becomes adapted to humans and captivity. It involves selection for a diversity of traits, of which tameness is a key feature: basically, domesticated animals tolerate, or welcome, human presence and handling. However, tameness alone does not imply domestication.

It is possible to breed tame silver foxes within relatively few generations when very stringent selection criteria are used. These animals actively seek human attention and are easy to handle. This is also possible with mink. Preliminary research suggests that it may be possible to breed arctic foxes with similar characteristics, although this has not been pursued to any great extent. No systematic selection for tameness has been carried out in raccoon dogs.

The breeding of animals on fur farms is controlled by humans, and they exhibit a number of physical differences from their wild counterparts; these are largely related to selective breeding for pelt characteristics and body size. However, mink, foxes and raccoon dogs on fur farms are still essentially wild animals and are not domesticated. Nor are they tame: they are generally fearful of human presence and are unsuitable for intensive farming. While selective breeding of fur animals that are more tolerant of human presence could be a positive step to improving their welfare, this would not address the significant welfare issues associated with the husbandry requirements of the fur industry. Nor would it be compatible with the fur industry's focus on selective breeding for pelt colour, size and quality.



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“ The majority of European citizens polled in over 20 countries, including those with substantial fur production industries, are opposed to rearing animals in cages for their fur. ”

The welfare of mink and foxes farmed for fur in Europe is extremely poor

The Five Domains Model for assessing animal welfare was originally developed in 1994 to evaluate welfare compromises in sentient species used in research, teaching and testing. The model has been expanded over the years to include a range of negative mental/emotional experiences and to incorporate positive experiences. The focus of the model is on the presence or absence of various internal physical/functional states and external circumstances/interactions (domains 1-4) that give rise to negative and/or positive mental experiences/states (domain 5). The balance of positive and negative mental experiences determines the overall welfare of the animal.

The welfare of mink, foxes and raccoon dogs farmed for fur is severely compromised across all five domains. Negative conditions and interactions overwhelmingly outweigh positive ones in domains 2 (physical environment) and 4 (behavioural interactions), and may often do so in domains 1 (nutrition) and 3 (health). The highly restrictive and largely barren conditions on fur farms provide little opportunity for welfare enhancement and positive experiences. The overall mental state of the animals (domain 5) is therefore likely to be dominated by negative experiences, resulting in poor welfare and a 'life not worth living'.

Levels of fear, stereotypic behaviour, fur-chewing/tail-biting, physical deformities (bent feet), and reproductive failure/infant mortality show that the needs of mink, foxes and raccoon dogs on fur farms are not being met. Mink, foxes and raccoon dogs are highly motivated to access specific resources and perform species-specific behaviours that are not possible in the housing systems currently used on fur farms. There is no evidence that selective-breeding of animals used for fur production could fulfil their welfare needs in cage-rearing systems. Nor is there any evidence that current rearing conditions on fur farms result in the loss of species-specific behaviours, or that improvements in the housing systems used on fur farms could lead to significant improvements in the welfare of fur animals.

European citizens are opposed to fur farming

The majority of European citizens polled in over 20 countries, including those with substantial fur production industries, are opposed to rearing animals in cages for their fur. Public opinion was only divided in Denmark as to whether mink farming should be allowed to resume following the COVID-19 pandemic. A growing number of European countries have already implemented bans on rearing animals for fur, and there is widespread support for a ban at EU level.

WelFur cannot address the major welfare issues for mink, foxes and raccoon dogs farmed for fur

The European Fur Breeders Association (now Fur Europe) launched the WelFur project in 2009 to develop on-farm welfare assessment protocols for mink and foxes, which were published in 2015. A protocol for raccoon dogs was added in 2020. However, these protocols:

- have been specifically designed around the very serious limitations of current housing systems and reward the *status quo*, even where this is known to compromise welfare, rather than encouraging the development of systems with the potential to provide a higher level of welfare
- do not adequately penalise practices that fail to meet existing minimum standards set out in the Council of Europe Recommendations
- do not address inhumane handling and killing methods and the lack of training for all personnel engaged in the slaughter of fur animals
- downplay the importance of serious injuries associated with extreme suffering

- underestimate the true levels of mortality and stereotypes
- use inadequate measures of hunger, human-animal relationships, and positive mental states
- use complex scoring systems to combine different welfare measures into a single category indicating the overall welfare level, which allows high scores on some elements to mask serious failings on others
- cannot achieve WelFur's stated aims of ensuring fur animals live 'a good life' and providing 'the latest scientific reference' for fur-farmed species
- do not take account of societal concerns, and score welfare only up to a ceiling of 'best current practice'; and
- are misleading as the basis for a labelling system

Thus WelFur cannot address the major welfare issues for mink, foxes and raccoon dogs farmed for fur, the issues associated with inhumane handling and slaughter methods, or serious inadequacies in current labelling and regulation. The 'best current practice' ceiling makes the WelFur scores both of limited use and misleading because most people would consider 'best current practice' to be an unacceptable level of welfare. Alternative rearing systems with the potential for higher levels of welfare do not exist for mink, foxes and raccoon dogs reared by the fur industry.

Conclusions and recommendations

The current regulatory framework for the protection of fur animal welfare in the European Union is inadequate. Enrichment of existing housing systems cannot address the serious welfare problems inherent in the cage systems used on fur farms. Fear of humans in the animals used by the fur industry, and difficulties in handling and management, present insurmountable obstacles to the adoption of more extensive systems. It is impossible for the welfare and biological needs of mink, foxes and raccoon dogs to be met by the fur industry.

The farming of mink, foxes and raccoon dogs for fur should be prohibited in accordance with Council Directive 98/58/EC, which states that *No animal shall be kept for farming purposes unless*

it can reasonably be expected, on the basis of its genotype or phenotype, that it can be kept without detrimental effect on its health or welfare; and the Council of Europe Recommendation Concerning Fur Animals that No animal shall be kept for its fur if: a. the conditions of this Recommendation cannot be met, or if b. the animal belongs to a species whose members, despite these conditions being met, cannot adapt to captivity without welfare problems.

The European Commission committed to proposing legislation to end the use of cages for animals farmed for food. It would be illogical and unjustifiable to continue to allow animals to be farmed for fur in cages while prohibiting the use of similar cages for animals farmed for food.