

ORTOVOX

Ortovox: Wool and animal welfare

Ortovox is a German mountain sports brand who believes prioritising animal welfare can contribute significantly to a company's long-term success.

Before the topic of mulesing became well known to fashion consumers, Ortovox had already decided to make a commitment to avoid mulesed wool, which would prove to be no small feat for a brand halfway across the world from the Australian wool it relies upon.

In this article, we are joined by the brand's Head of CSR, Katrin Bauer, to reflect on their journey of transitioning away from mulesed wool.



“ *Changing the tradition is the real issue.* ”

— ORTOVOX

FOUR PAWS: Today brands have access to multiple certifications that aim to mitigate the practice of mulesing in wool supply chains. As a smaller brand and an early mover on the issue of mulesing, Ortovox did not have the luxury of leaning on certifications. So where did you start?

ORTOVOX: We wanted to understand the issue better and found ourselves first asking 'why do we need to make the distinction that wool is mulesed-free at all'? So, we took a close look at the wool supply chain, which we found to be so convoluted that the company using the wool seldom knows where it comes from!

Every question we asked resulted in five new ones that needed to be answered. We found many of the answers but also realised it's ok to not have them all straight away. Our experience showed us that questioning the status-quo helps you find ways to do things better. Every company wants to continually improve, and we can't do that by shying away from our responsibilities to the animals we rely on to provide the wool in our products.

FP: How did you go about achieving a mulesing-free supply chain, when the proliferation of animal welfare certifications we see in the market today was not yet realised at the time?

O: We had been sourcing much of our wool for a long time from Australia. What we learned was that merino sheep had been poorly bred for 100 years. So firstly, it was important that the farmers in Australia who supply us were those that had undertaken careful breeding practices in their herd. These are farmers who have switched to sheep that are naturally more resistant to fly maggot infestation, which makes mulesing unnecessary.

We also recognised the importance of establishing personal relationships and contacts, instead of simply outsourcing the ordering of our wool. In this way, we get to keep control over what is delivered.

Through the close contact with all our supply chain partners and by working with the best available certifications, as well as most importantly - the farmers who are mulesing-free, we've been able to confidently ensure that our brand only sells mulesed-free wool products.

FP: What has been a key learning in your challenge to eliminate mulesed wool?

O: Change requires everyone to do their part. On our journey, we saw how every single actor in the wool supply chain needed to be engaged and challenged.

- The farmer who changes after generations and stops the practice of mulesing.
- The company that invests time, money, but above all heart and soul in its products and the personal relationships behind them.
- The customers who recognise their responsibility and are prepared to pay a higher price for a high-quality, more animal-friendly product because they take the effort to understand how complex the interrelationships are.

It takes every single participant, whether manufacturer or user, to move sustainability forward.

FP: Mulesing is just one animal welfare issue concerning one type of animal-derived material. What insights could you share about how the fashion industry might achieve improvements to animal welfare at large?

O: It was during one of our Tasmania trips that we realised the farmers are constantly looking for improvements in animal welfare beyond the exclusion of mulesing. For example, one of the farmers questioned himself on whether punched ear marking of the sheep is still necessary, and even admitted to himself that changing the tradition is the real issue. Since then, this procedure has no longer been practiced by the farmer, for the benefit of the sheep.

We understand that mulesing is a prominent issue because of its prevalence, but there are many animal welfare requirements that must be addressed well, so that sheep out there are living a good life.

For more information on developing an animal welfare policy, please refer to the [FOUR PAWS Policy Guidelines for Fashion Brands and Retailers](#).

While an animal welfare policy based on the Five Freedoms is a good start, did you know that the latest scientific research has found this to be an outdated tool for addressing animal welfare?¹

A better approach is based in the Five Domains model of animal welfare, which considers the role of the mental state of an animal in more detail and acknowledges that animals can have positive experiences to enhance their quality of life.²

The General Welfare Aims³ are a practical translation of the Five Domains model, namely:

1. good nutrition
2. good physical environment
3. good health
4. appropriate behavioural interactions (with the environment, other animals, and with humans)
5. positive mental experiences

So, what can brands do to ensure their animal welfare policies and supply chain practices align with the Five Domains model of animal welfare?

Develop a policy that aims to fulfil the Five Domains of animal welfare.

FOUR PAWS has developed guidelines which highlight our core principles, being to refine, reduce and replace animal-derived materials with the most animal-friendly and sustainable options available. These guidelines also highlight the certifications which most fulfil the Five Domains model of animal welfare.

— FOUR PAWS

The FOUR PAWS Case Study series are designed to shine a spotlight on brands that have overcome particular challenges and to share their learnings with other brands. The inclusion of a brand as a case study subject does not mean FOUR PAWS endorses the overall performance of the brand in relation to animal welfare.

References

¹ Mellor DJ. Moving beyond the "Five freedoms" by Updating the "Five Provisions" and Introducing Aligned "Animal Welfare Aims." *Animals*. 2016;6(10). doi:10.3390/ani6100059.

² Mellor DJ. Operational details of the five domains model and its key applications to the assessment and management of animal welfare. *Animals*. 2017;7(8). doi:10.3390/ani7080060.

³ FOUR PAWS 2021, Animal welfare assessment framework, accessed 15 June 2022, <https://www.four-paws.org/campaigns-topics/topics/science-and-research/animal-welfare-assessment-framework>.



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