

EXOTIC FEATHERS

Exotic feathers – also known as plumes – are feathers from ostriches, peafowl and other wild birds that are often used for clothing, accessories, decoration and as dusters¹. These feathers differ from the light fluffy coating beneath the feathers of geese and ducks, which is commonly known as down. Exotic feathers can be collected in the wild, from birds caught in the wild or on farms through cutting off feathers above the bloodline², or plucked from live or dead birds.

Every year, more than 1.6 million ostriches are killed for their feathers and to produce meat from their bodies and leather from their skin³. Ostrich farming originates from South Africa, which has become a hotspot for the Ostrich farming industry. The practice is also common in other African countries, Australia, China, North America⁴, Pakistan and on a small scale in Europe³.

Ostrich's lifespan on a farm is approximately 407 days/13 months and farmers can gather up to 36 kg of feathers within a year from just one bird¹. In the wild the average life span is 30 to 40 years⁵.

When it comes to farming peafowl (or known as a 'peacock' when referencing the male of the species) for their feathers, little information is available on farming conditions. While all three species of peafowl can be farmed for their feathers, farmers mostly choose the India peafowl⁶ or the Green Peafowl⁶. With peafowl farming being untransparent, it prevents fashion companies from having full insight into the entire production chain and farming conditions and therefore, from making an informed decision on using exotic feathers.

Animal Welfare Issues

- Ostriches and peafowl farming are often unregulated practices, leaving it to the industry to decide how to keep and handle their animals.
- Investigations showed repeated animal welfare violations and related animal suffering^{10,11}. Practices such as live plucking¹² or toe trimming¹³ are common, despite these practices causing great pain and stress to the animals.
- When confined in small spaces, ostriches often develop behavioural problems such as feather-picking, repeatedly lifting their head up and back until it touches the spine (behaviour directly linked to confinement in small, dark spaces)¹⁴, dietary indiscretion, excessive ingestion of feces (will interfere with taking in food)¹⁴.
- Ostriches seem to be prone to leg rotation making it another common issue to occur from handling. Affected birds struggle to get up or walk and experience pain and swelling¹².

INDUSTRY ACTION

Companies that have ditched exotic feathers:

SMCP⁷
STELLA MCCARTNEY⁸
ASOS⁸
TOPSHOP⁹



Replace

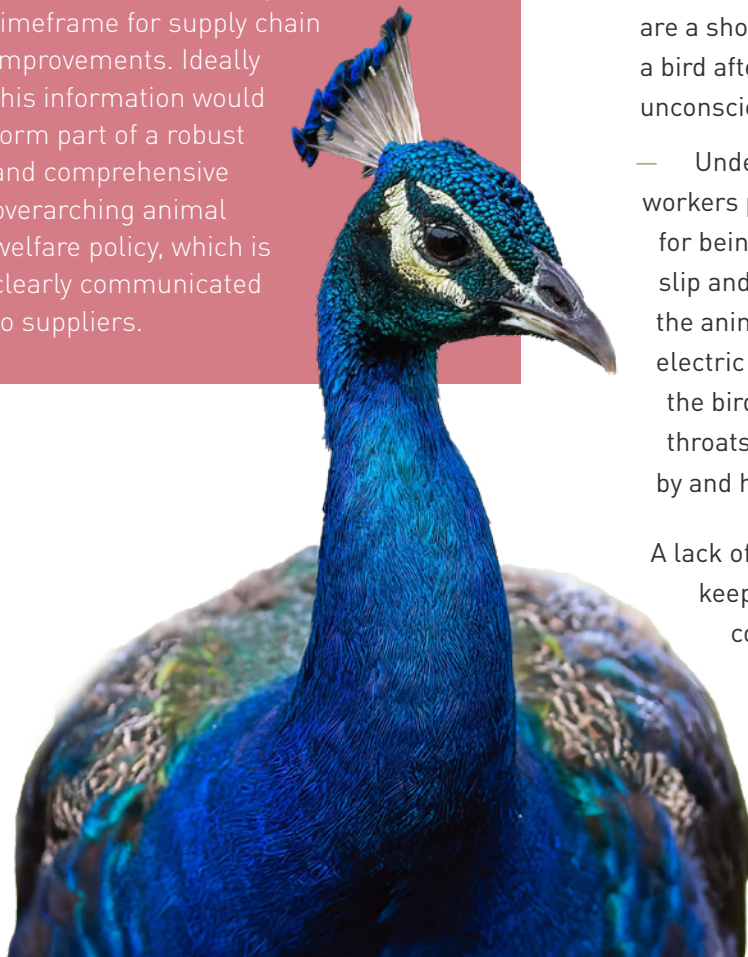
The only way to entirely avoid the suffering of ostriches, peacocks and other wild birds is to opt for animal-free alternatives. Innovative products such as ETHICAL PLUMES™ make this switch possible. Made from a natural fibre mix of rayon strands, ETHICAL PLUMES™ mimic the look and feel of ostrich feathers while being 100% cruelty free. Thereby being a viable alternative to ostrich feathers.



Be transparent

With consumers increasingly demanding transparency, communicating the steps you take to improve your supply chain has never been more important. It demonstrates your animal welfare and environmental credentials and helps consumers make an informed choice.

Ensure to transparently communicate your current use of animal derived materials and your timeframe for supply chain improvements. Ideally this information would form part of a robust and comprehensive overarching animal welfare policy, which is clearly communicated to suppliers.



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- Transporting ostriches from a farm to a slaughterhouse is very common in Canada and the USA, and the lack of regulations paired with long transport periods increase the probability of animals getting injured or dying during transport⁴. The recommended slaughter methods for ostriches are a shot in the head with a firearm or bleeding a bird after electrical stunning or making a bird unconscious by a captive bolt¹².
- Undercover investigations documented workers pulling ostriches into place by their wings for being slaughtered, where some animals would slip and fall. Workers then placed metal tongs on the animal's head and stunned them by passing an electric current through their heads. Afterwards the birds were hoisted upside down and had their throats slit while other ostriches were kept close by and had a clear view of the slaughter^{10,11}.

A lack of information and transparency regarding keeping conditions of peafowl on farms leaves companies mostly in the dark. In the wild, these animals choose high trees for roosting¹⁵, but on farms they are often housed in groups of four to five animals in a space of about 5m¹⁶, which increases the risk for parasitic infections if nests and shelters aren't

kept clean⁶. There is little knowledge of how peafowl are affected by enclosure size and lack of species-appropriate keeping conditions, but such restrictions usually cause stress and suffering for animals.

Conservation concerns

While the commonly farmed Indian and Green Peafowl are CITES listed and any trade with these animals or their parts needs to be reported, there is a considerable risk that the usage of peacock feathers encourages illegal trade. In India, peafowl are holy and only foraging for naturally shed feathers is legal. However, poachers kill peacocks to smuggle their feathers out of the country¹⁷. Until 2018, according to CITES data, Kenya was the main exporter until being surpassed by China in 2020¹⁸. While the most common source for Indian Peafowl feathers seem to be animals bred in captivity, Hong Kong exported 26,300 feathers from wild caught birds in 2020¹⁸. Very little is known about trade of feathers from Green Peafowl as there is hardly any export data available. It seems China is again the main exporter, with the USA being their main trading partner for these feathers¹⁹. According to CITES trade database confiscated or seized feathers from Green Peafowl are the main source but feathers from wild birds are also listed¹⁹. The Congo Peafowl has no special status on CITES but is listed as "near threatened" on the IUCN Red List²⁰. In addition to hunting/trapping for their feathers, habitat destruction puts pressure on and threatens remaining wild populations of Green and Congo Peafowl^{21,22}.

Sourcing peacock feathers for fashion products increases the risk of supporting illegal trade of feathers and poaching of wild peafowl.

Impacts on Human Health

Ostriches are susceptible to bird flu²³ and outbreaks³ are common on ostrich farms, which poses a risk to farm workers and wild bird populations alike²⁴.



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FOUR PAWS calls on fashion companies to stop using exotic feathers; to reduce the number of animal derived materials used overall, in favour of sustainable animal-free alternatives; and to ensure that the animals which continue to be used within domesticated animal supply chains experience an excellent state of welfare.

For more information, review the [FOUR PAWS policy development guidelines](#).

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“ Together we can drive an animal-friendly fashion future, and create a world where people treat animals with respect, empathy and understanding. ”