

Wool: The Hidden Lives of Sheep

From Sheep to Sweater

If you're like many people, you might wake up and put on a wool sweater, woolly hat and scarf, and some sheepskin boots. Putting on clothes is something that you do every day. But no matter how much time and effort you put into picking out the perfect clothes, shoes, or accessories, you still might not have stopped to think about where they came from—or *whom* they came from.

It's easy to forget sometimes that wool and sheepskin are made from the actual hair and skin of animals—sheep—who were once alive and capable of feeling the sun and the wind on their skin, before their lives were taken from them.

Every single piece of clothing and every accessory made from wool has a story and a face—of a sheep who was abused, neglected, and exploited. Animals mistreated and killed for fashion have hearts, minds, families, and feelings, just as we do.



Life in the Wool Industry

If you were born a sheep in the wool industry, your ears would likely be notched and your tail would be chopped off. If you were male, you'd be castrated.

About 25 percent of the world's wool comes from Australia. On most wool farms there, young lambs endure the practices mentioned above—usually without anesthetics or pain relief.



It's considered "normal" in the Australian wool industry for millions of young lambs to die every spring.

If workers sheared you too early, you might die of exposure in the winter. Or, because you were bred to grow an excessive amount of wool, you might die of heat exhaustion in the summer.

The American Sheep Industry Association states, "Annual shearings using approved, standardized handling techniques are designed for the comfort and wellbeing of the sheep."¹ However, since shearers are paid by volume, not by the hour, this often leads them to work quickly and to kick and punch frightened sheep in order to get them to "cooperate."

I have seen shearers punch sheep with their shears or their fists until the sheep's nose bled. I have seen sheep with half their faces shorn off.

—Eyewitness

During shearing, sheep can sustain injuries ranging from nicks to severe gashes to complete amputations of their udders, ears, and other body parts.

PETA's video exposé of wool farms in the leading wool-producing regions of Australia and the U.S. shows that workers violently punched terrified sheep in the face, stomped and stood on their heads and necks, threw them to the ground, cut them with sharp metal clippers, and even beat them on the head with electric clippers and a hammer. Some sheep died from such abuse.

"Mulesing"—in which workers cut chunks of skin and flesh off the backs of sheep's legs and around their tails, usually without painkillers—is a standard practice in the Australian wool industry. This crude



procedure is carried out to prevent flystrike—which occurs when flies lay eggs in the folds of sheep’s skin and the hatched maggots eat away at the animals’ flesh. Sheep who have been specifically bred to have wrinkled skin and therefore produce more wool are more prone to flystrike.

When you were no longer wanted, you’d probably be sent to auction. Because of extreme crowding in enclosures at auctions, you might die from injuries or stress. If you survived the auction, you might be sent to slaughter.



Despite clear evidence of sheep’s intelligence and capacity to feel the same fundamental emotions that humans do, the meat industry continues to abuse them in ways that would warrant cruelty-to-animals charges if dogs or cats were the victims. More than 30 million sheep are



slaughtered for their flesh each year in Australia, and approximately 20 million of those killed are lambs. These defenseless animals are crammed onto trucks and transported for up to 48 hours with no access to food or water.

If you weren’t sent straight to slaughter, you might be forced to board a ship to be transported from Australia to the Middle East.

Every year, around 3 million sheep are subjected to the misery of live export from Australia to the Middle East and North Africa. They’re slaughtered after enduring a grueling journey on an extremely crowded, filthy, disease-ridden ship. The voyage can last days or even weeks, and they may be exposed to all weather extremes. Many die before they reach port.

Sheep Matter

Sheep are gentle individuals who, like all animals, experience pain, fear, and loneliness. But because there’s a market for their fleece and skin, they’re treated as nothing more than wool-producing machines.

If they were left alone and not genetically manipulated, they’d grow just enough wool to protect themselves from temperature extremes. The fleece provides them with effective insulation against both cold and heat. But in the wool industry, farmers have bred them to grow an unnatural amount of wool by forcing individuals with thick fleeces to mate.



Your Choices Matter

There are durable, stylish, warm fabrics available that aren’t made out of wool or animal skins. Wool-free options include cotton, cotton flannel, polyester, and synthetic fleece. You can join the millions of people all over the world who believe that compassion is the fashion. Protect sheep—don’t buy wool.

¹American Sheep Industry Association. (n.d.). “Sheep Welfare Statement.” Retrieved February 24, 2017, from http://www.sheepusa.org/NewsMedia_PressReleases_2014_SheepWelfareStatement.