



30 May 2008

Leather is not wasted and downgrading of leather or footwear is largely eliminated. When you consider how hard industry has fought to find cheaper labour, working harder to make more of the most expensive element of a leather shoe, the actual leather material, can dwarf a cent saved here or there with labour. In each of the countries in which ECCO have set up tanneries alongside their shoe factories, they look for local material that can supplement their basic bovine production. Perhaps this really began in Indonesia by accident when they discovered the excellent local fine grained hides, but it has become a policy.

Consequently the scouts were sent out when the company decided to build a shoe factory in Xiamen in China. So was born their current marketing campaign 'bring out your inner sherpa'. This exciting campaign is possible because they have discovered unexploited value in the Chinese yaks that exist in the high Tibetan plains of Sichuan, Gansu and Tibet.

Like kangaroo but more useful ECCO describe yak ox-hide as 'primordially powerful' and with characteristics evolved from the tough life at 4,000m above sea level. They have discovered that yak hide has exceptional tensile strength – like the kangaroo but more useful as it is thicker.

They can make tougher boots or use thinner leather to maintain strength and improve breathability – which is useful if you have Gore-Tex XCR lined footwear where the thicker the leather the greater the likely problem with breathability. The hides are rugged and damaged from the tough lives the animals lead but ECCO have succeeded in persuading the consumer that this is a feature and capped it all with their memorable campaign. In the days of rampant warble fly how many tanners would have loved to be able to market the healed warble scars as proof of quality rather than a large unusable defect?

The designs used are specific to the yak but derive from the footwear styles where they use smaller pieces of bovine to better utilise lower grade hides; so the approach works well with the more defective yak. Looking at the footwear the consumer is unlikely to condemn the product based on the surface scars. Processing yak is not easy and getting the raw material requires considerable knowledge and skill. Yak numbers are declining as China urbanises and nearly all Chinese yak are now the smaller farmed variety rather than the larger stronger animals that roamed in large herds.

Travel out of Lhasa and authors such as John Flinn argue that you leave the 21st century and enter the 'Land of the Yak', since rural life without these shaggy beasts would be all but impossible.

Yaks plough the fields and transport goods. Yak leather is used for clothing, footwear and many other things. The rough outer hair is woven into tent fabric, the soft inner hair into blankets.

Yak meat fills momos, the dumpling-like staple of Tibetan menus. Yak butter fuels monastery lamps and, when properly rancid, gives Tibetan tea its singular taste. Yak dung is gathered up by children, slapped onto the sides of houses to dry and then burned for cooking fires.

Yaks are so uniquely suited to the cold and oxygen-deprived air of the Tibetan plateau that it is said they can't survive below 12,000 feet. And if you drive on the road from the airport to Lhasa you will still see the coracles made of raw yak hide. These are still the best way to move around the rivers as they can withstand scuffing on the many rocks and are so light they can be easily picked



up and carried over the many rapids.

If ECCO are true to their marketing literature great care has been taken to be environmentally and socially responsible in collecting the hides. This is a skill that tanners may need to develop on a wider scale. For decades we have said that leather demand will outstrip hide and skin supply and the balance of the economics of leather making will change.

In most end uses for leather quite good substitutes are available and even some faux leathers have worked harder to improve their performance and quality than the leather industry appears to have done over the years. So it is hard to see the economics changing too much.

But we are already starting to see changes in the long term supply situation as land becomes scarcer and the world argues about the balance of tropical forest, land for growing foodstuffs and land for growing biofuels. As the world population grows and gets richer the demand for meat has always grown and fuelled more raw material for the tanner.

Now it would seem that while red meat eating will continue to increase in many parts of the Middle East and Asia, the real growth in meat eating lies in poultry and pigs. With so much pigskin eaten this implies a potential reduction in skins going forward. It will not, of course, be a smooth and obvious event.

Russia is building up its cattle herds and Africa has land that can be farmed more effectively. On the other hand, in China the move to preserve land for grain means that some farmers are being asked to live in city skyscrapers and commute and others to breed their pigs in multi-storied buildings.

As a consequence it is quite likely that tanners will turn more to developing products from raw material such as camel, kangaroo, elk and deer. Even the more available goat is creating interest for development into less common end uses.

Work in New Zealand on the hollow fibred possum to try and find better end uses for their fur and skin might start to have greater relevance for not just the possum but other less exploited hides and skins. Fear of pressure groups has deterred tanners from many raw materials but a lot of this is now seen as an environmental error, as the skins become available regardless of leather demand. In fact, tanning is the best environmental way to deal with them. An example of upmarket products developed in this way is Sandstorm bags made in Kenya by UK entrepreneur Keith Steel. He started using bovine leathers from the local Bata tannery and later began neatly mixing safari tent canvas with an oiled nubuck made from local camel. Rugged and strong, like the yak it adds distinction, uniqueness and technical authenticity to the product. As a Scandinavian company, it may not be long before we see elk footwear rolling into ECCO stores worldwide. It certainly appears to be time for tanners to prepare the ground for using skins that they have avoided until now and accept that they have a responsibility to educate the world that it is good to tan these hides and skins rather than throw them away.



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