Stepping up to save the Amazon

Destruction of rainforests in remote parts of the Amazon may seem a far-off concern to many in the leather industry, given the numerous other environmental challenges that directly affect the daily operations of tanneries, such as toxic chemicals and energy use. However, cattle ranching drives 80% of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon and leading international players in the leather industry have recognised that their impact leads all the way back to the ranch. As a result, in recent months, significant strides have been taken that give real hope of a deforestation-free leather supply-chain.

The National Wildlife Federation is a US-based conservation organisation with over four million supporters. Our international work aims to protect tropical forests, which are home to over half of all species and store enormous amounts of carbon. We focus on deforestation for cattle in Brazil for two simple reasons: ranching in the Brazilian Amazon is the single largest driver of deforestation on earth and because workable solutions exist.

The latest global assessments have found that half of all tropical deforestation occurs in Brazil. Those concerned with reducing their carbon dioxide emissions should note how burning forests for pasture affects emissions for leather production: while turning chrome-tanned leather into 1kg of full-grain leather produces less than 1kg CO_2, the average emissions in the production of 1kg of raw hide in Brazil are over 20kg CO_2.

The role of ranching in Amazon deforestation has been recognised for decades, but the Brazilian Amazon is enormous, half the size of China, and government institutions have been unable to enforce laws. This created a situation where many ranchers do not acquire or register their land legally.

The sheer size of the Amazon and number of ranches made tackling the problem seem impossible until last year. A Greenpeace report linked ranches involved in illegal deforestation all the way to leather end products. In response, several brands adopted a zero deforestation leather sourcing policy, and in Brazil, four of the largest slaughterhouses, supermarket chains and the Brazilian Sustainable Cattle Working Group did the same. Major cattle-producing Amazon states are supporting these moves with new efforts facilitating registration and key slaughterhouses have agreed to ensure that all their suppliers map their properties and enter into environmental registries within the next eighteen months.

Cattle can be moved hundreds of kilometres from ranch to slaughterhouse, and hides thousands of kilometres from slaughterhouse to shipping ports. Without a system of traceability, there is no way to guarantee that deforestation is not an 'ingredient' in any Brazilian leather. But this doesn't mean those concerned about deforestation should stop sourcing from Brazil. Strong international encouragement for efforts on the ground will induce ranchers to conserve their forest.

Tanners who want to play a part in this effort can adopt a zero deforestation sourcing policy and choose Brazilian suppliers actively working to ensure they can trace their hides to ranches not clearing forests. This is a chance to actually support Amazon conservation and profit from a growing demand for environmentally-responsible products.

The National Wildlife Federation is encouraging several initiatives that are implementing change and is fostering support from throughout the industry. The Leather Working Group has addressed traceability from slaughterhouse to end product by agreeing to a stamping system for Brazilian hides in its new protocol, along with an expectation that hides come from ranches not clearing forests.

We are educating our supporters about the problem and the solutions via our website, magazines and student outreach programmes. We believe that knowing the shoes they wear can help protect valuable rainforest will give consumers of brands supporting 'zero deforestation' leather an extra spring in their step.

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