

The importance of fur farming in Poland

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Natural leather is probably the first material used by humans for the production of covering and later, clothing. Until the second half of the 19th century, furs were obtained mainly by hunters from wild animals, but due to the demand of the rapidly growing industry, human settlements expanding to new areas as well as overexploitation, furs have become a scarce commodity. Shortages of this material have significantly influenced the intensive development of fur farms. In Poland, the fur industry has almost 90 years of tradition, and farms are often a multigenerational heritage (Piórkowska, 2013).

The furs of fur animals are used to produce various types of warm clothing and clothing accessories. Fur items owe their popularity to unique qualitative features that cannot be obtained in the production of artificial fabrics. They belong to the most efficient heat-insulating materials, and their specific structure has a beneficial effect on the human body (Kuźniewicz, 2013). The effect of fabrics on the human body primarily depends on ionization of the material. Natural furs have both negative and positive charges, but with a definite advantage of the former ones, thanks to which they have health-promoting properties. In furs made of artificial materials, only positive charges have been found and these have an adverse effect on the human body (Jarosz, 1993). Particular attention should be paid to the durability of natural fur, which is determined by the histological structure, the degree of hair embedding and the quantitative ratio of cover hair to down hair. These parameters change during the year and under the influence of a number of external and internal factors, so that even with the use of modern technologies, man is not able to produce an artificial product that would retain the characteristics of natural fur. The features characterizing the quality of fur of fur animals also include the density and thickness of the hair coat, its height and alignment, elasticity and fluffiness of the hair, softness, colour and shine (Kuźniewicz, 2013).

The only disadvantage of natural fur skins is the ethical aspect of their production, which has recently become the subject of many heated discussions, including topics ranging from the production technology, through animal welfare on farms to the basic question: "do we have to kill animals to wear clothes?". There are also increasingly frequent voices of pro-animal organizations, whose members actively attack the fur industry by appropriate influencing the public opinion. This poses a considerable threat to Polish fur animal breeding industry, which is, after all, appreciated globally. The main arguments of the organizations condemning the fur animal farming is the nonsensicality of this production sector due to the wide range of artificial fur alternatives as well as animal welfare and environmental protection.

Meanwhile, Polish breeders are taking steps to improve the conditions of their farms, which directly affect the quality of their product, and consequently – higher incomes. At the moment, Poland is the second producer of fur skins in Europe and the third in the world, and their high quality makes them achieve one of the highest prices on fur auctions. Such results would not be possible without providing animals with high standards of well-being, adequate nutrition and constant veterinary care. An example of such activity can be the WELFUR program implemented among breeders, in which standards for dealing with the most important species of fur animals, i.e. minks, common foxes and Arctic foxes have been developed (Brzozowski, 2012). This program is not imposed by either nation-

al or EU legislation on animal welfare. According to the Polish Association of Fur Animal Breeders (PZHZF), this is the industry's own initiative aimed at raising, maintaining and officially confirming the high standard of breeding fur animals. Based on the assumptions of WELFUR and the Code of Good Breeding Practices, the Polish Association of Breeders and Producers of Fur Animals (PZHiPZF) carries out certifications of farms that meet these conditions. These certificates are already recognized by the Auction House in Helsinki and are therefore a confirmation for the buyers that the product they acquired comes from an ethical farm that maintains a high standard of welfare and biosecurity. An additional advantage of certified furs is that they achieve significantly higher prices at auctions, which further encourages subsequent breeders to join the program (sagafurs.com).

An invaluable asset of carnivorous fur animal farms is their role in the utilization of by-products of animal origin. Sometimes arguments appear that this is just a slogan repeated by breeders in order to justify their industry, because the animal carcasses produced by them also belong to waste of animal origin and must be disposed. Gugolek (2011 b) calculated in his studies the recycling efficiency rate of farms, based on the example of 9 farms from podlaskie and warmińsko-mazurskie provinces, which amounted to between 76.9 and 94.9%. In practice this means that, for example, from 100 t of by-products that were provided to the farm, approximately 5.57-23.1 t of by-products in the form of carcasses and fur animal fat were produced. Therefore, recycling efficiency of such farms is very high and this is the most economic and ecological form of disposal of by-products of animal origin. Additionally, many breeders declare that they use the obtained fur animal fat on their own, as a fuel during the steam treatment of cereal middlings, which has a significant effect on decreasing the amount of waste and increases farm profitability. According to PZHiPZF, Polish farms naturally recycle more than 40% (approximately 400,000 tons) of the total mass of by-products of animal origin of II and III category processed in Poland. The Association also emphasizes that it is extremely important, also due to the fact that industrial disposal is not only expensive and energy-consuming, but primarily, harmful to the environment (pzhizpf.pl).

Accusations appear very often that breeding fur animals is harmful to the environment, but when you delve into this subject, it turns out that the situation is quite the opposite. The production of natural leather itself is much more ecological than the production of artificial materials, because it is a product that mainly consists of various forms of proteins – compounds undergoing natural biochemical transformations in the decomposition process. The recycling of the skin both in the raw form and processed for fur products occurs without the emission of chemical compounds harmful to the environment, which cannot be said about synthetic products obtained in the oil processing technology. Fur animal farms are also a non-typical form of animal protection in the natural environment. In the Polish breeding, this is most evident in case of beavers, which after the 2nd World War occurred only in two sanctuaries – near Pasłęka River and near Wigry Lake, whereas a farm established in the Department of Experimental Animal Breeding of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Popielno initiated the current population of these animals (Gugolek, 2011 a). Thanks to the actively growing fur animal breeding, obtaining skins from wild animals has also significantly decreased. Intensive breeding works caused that the quality of livestock skins is much higher than in animals obtained from the natural environment, so catching them became uneconomical.

Economic calculation is an important argument on the side of fur farms. According to the PWC Report (2014), approximately 50,000 people are employed directly or indirectly in the fur industry. and the economic impact generated during the year as a result of the sector's activity amounts to over PLN 1.7 billion, which constitutes approximately 2.5% of the total annual value in Polish agriculture. It should be noted that almost 100% of Polish fur skin production is exported, which translates into 4% share of this industry in the total Polish agri-food export and approximately 7% of export of agricultural, forestry and fishing products. Such a result has a significant effect on the importance of the country on the global market. In addition, farms' need for technical supplies, feeds and media have a significant impact on the domestic economy. The average tax burden of a small livestock farm (up to 5,000 animals) is approximately PLN 96,800, with 47% of this amount being the personal income tax (PIT) of employees and owners. On the other hand, the average large enterprise (over 5,000 animals)

annually pays about PLN 486,000 in taxes to the state, 90% of which is VAT, contributions and PIT of employees and owners (IPiR, 2017).

At the beginning of 2018, the Parliamentary Team of Animal Friends submitted to the Sejm a draft amendment to the Animal Protection Act, which contained, among others, the decision on a complete ban on breeding fur animals in Poland. Such a move would not only erase the previously presented income from the budget, but would also have an extremely negative impact on the domestic and foreign economy. Due to a large number of people employed in this production sector, there would be an increase in unemployment, mainly in rural areas where the farms are located. It should be emphasized that many of these people would have huge problems with retraining for another job, and the breeders themselves would often lose multi-generational family companies. Losses would also have been recorded by the processing plants, which until now earned money from selling the by-products of animal origin to the farm owners, instead of bearing the costs of their disposal. It is worth noting here that fur animal farms are currently the only one serious competition for disposal companies, mainly foreign ones, that would significantly benefit from ban on breeding fur animals. Due to the above, it is worth approaching with attention and a certain reserve to the information provided by some "pro-animal" organizations, which, with appropriate selection of slogans and materials, significantly affect the perception of this production sector by the public. Of course, the existence of such organizations is important and useful because they provide the breeders with an additional incentive to comply with the principles of animal welfare. Additionally, they are able to indicate the farms where the law concerning the rules of animal maintenance is violated and lead to draw the appropriate consequences. It is an invaluable role not only in the breeding of fur animals, but in all the sectors of animal production as well as the rearing of companion animals. However, the presentation of negligence that is condemned by the breeders themselves, as the image of each fur animal farm in the country and worldwide clearly affects the opinion of people with little or no knowledge on the real image of animal husbandry. This results in their indignation and encourages them to actively participate in the goal to ban breeding. However, it should be considered that a complete ban on breeding will not diminish animal suffering, but will even increase it. Since in the European Union, including Poland, there is a specific legal paradigm to ensure the minimum requirements for animal welfare, in some countries (e.g. Russia, China), which would certainly take over the market of fur products, there is virtually no animal protection in this area (Adamczyk et al., 2017). Therefore, it can be said that the ethics of breeding fur animals is not a legal matter, but an individual respect that people should give to animals for which they are responsible, and this aspect directly translates into the welfare of animals on farms.

Summary

Due to their properties and specific structure, skins of fur animals cannot be replaced by any synthetic material, they also have a pro-health effect on the human body. However, the ethical aspects of breeding – which at first glance heavily burden this sector – have become the basis for a heated discussion about the legitimacy of fur trade and its possible prohibition. Each year, over 400,000 tons of by-products of animal origin, which would otherwise have to be subjected to energy-consuming and non-ecological disposal, are disposed in a natural manner on carnivorous fur animal farms. Approximately 50,000 people, mainly from the rural areas, are employed in the fur trade sector and the annual income of this branch of industry amounts to PLN 1.7 billion. The introduction of a ban on breeding fur animals in Poland would not only cause significant economic losses on the national scale, but also paradoxically contribute to the deterioration of welfare of fur animals, the breeding of which will be taken over by countries with negligible or no legislation on the protection of farm animals.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF FUR FARMING IN POLAND

Abstract

Breeding fur animals in Poland has almost 90 years of tradition, and farms are often a multigenerational heritage. The most popular species kept in Poland are American mink, common foxes and arctic foxes, but also raccoon dogs are of considerable importance. Fur skins, which are a natural product of animal origin, are more environmentally friendly than synthetic materials, mainly produced from petroleum products, and wrongly called organic. The degradation time of natural skin is shorter than that of synthetic materials, and no harmful substances are emitted into the environment during the process. An additional advantage of fur farms in relation to the environment is their role in the natural utilization of animal by-products and non-specific protection of animals in the natural environment. The undeniable advantage of fur farms is their significant contribution to the state economy. Farms directly and indirectly give employment to 50,000 people, and the economic impact generated during the year as a result of the activities of these farms is over PLN 1.7 billion. The farms alone generated over PLN 90 million in this list, which translated into almost 1% of Poland's budget revenues. Additionally, due to the fact that almost 100% of production is exported, the industry ensures a significant share of the country on the global market. Despite all these advantages, fur farming in Poland is not much liked by the public. The ethical side of the enterprise arouses much controversy, but as long as animal rights are respected and animals are kept in line with welfare principles, breeding is no different to keeping poultry, cattle or pigs.

Key words: fur animals, economy, ethics