



H&M takes ambitious strides with new leather strategy

The Swedish fashion retailer has already promoted its work with vegetable tanner Tärnsjö as part of its Conscious collection – and it is now ready to take its leather sourcing one step further.

The ethos behind H&M's Conscious collection is to “make fashion sustainable and sustainability fashionable”, according to its CEO, Karl-Johan Persson. Using materials such as Tencel, organic cotton and recycled wool, the Swedish retailer says it is a vision of what can be achieved with sustainable materials. It uses ‘organic’ leather – described as leather from cows bred for organic meat production – from local tannery Tärnsjö and promotes its sustainable practices in the marketing of the shoes and bags.

“Consumers are becoming increasingly aware about sustainability issues and require that we as a company take our responsibility,” Ulrika Isaksson, a press officer for H&M, told us. “At the same time, we believe it makes business sense to include sustainability in our core business, in order to continue operating in a world facing resource scarcity and problems connected to climate change and increased population.”

In mid-2014 H&M also introduced Clevercare, a labelling system designed to encourage users to wash less frequently and at lower temperatures. A 30-degree wash uses half the energy of a 60-degree wash, it says, and around a quarter of greenhouse gases in a garment's life occur in the user phase. “Conscious is about finding materials with less environmental impact from a raw material perspective, but also when it comes to finding processes with less environmental footprint,” explains Ms Isaksson.

“For leather, it was important for us to go beyond the tannery and all the way down to the farm, making sure that the animals are treated well. Animal welfare is very important to us and to source from organic meat farms certified according to the Swedish organic standard KRAV is a way to make sure of this.”

Tärnsjö, established 140 years ago, devoted itself to vegetable-tanned leather in 1987, uses organic dyes from plants and water-based finishes. Sourcing animals locally also means a reduction in the carbon footprint. Torbjörn Lundin, one of the tannery's owners, has told *World Leather*, “We know that the animals processed in big slaughterhouses have often been moved long distances. This goes against the mood of trying to produce as close to the end consumer as possible. So, we buy as many hides as we can from two or three very small local slaughterhouses, and work with a number of farmers who produce organic cattle.”

New standards

Aside from the Conscious range, H&M sources from Leather Working Group-assessed tanneries for its footwear ranges. It joined the multi-stakeholder group in 2009. In 2012, 27% of its leather was ‘certified’, rising to 49% in 2013. “Our goal is to increase this share every year and thereby help to strengthen the currently limited markets for certified leather,” it said in a recent sustainability report.

However, Ms Isaksson informs us the company is now taking this a step further. Not content with the scope of the LWG audits, it is looking into launching its own version from 2015 onwards.

“Our goal has been to gradually increase the use of leather from LWG certified tanneries. However, these certifications do not currently cover all critical issues in leather tanning, such as labour, health and safety,” she says. “Therefore, even though we continue to encourage our suppliers to use LWG certified tanneries, we are shifting our focus to developing a set of holistic requirements and a corresponding auditing tool specifically for leather tanneries that takes all the essential social and environmental aspects into account. We will apply these requirements to all tanneries involved in making our products from 2015 onwards.”

The target is to audit all strategic tanneries that make leather for its products during the course of next year. From there, the goal will be to only use leather from those tanneries that fulfil these stronger and more holistic requirements. “As part of this, we will also integrate all tanneries involved in making our products in our supplier assessment and relationship management tools to provide them with continued support and rewards for further improvements also beyond these requirements.” ★

Bags and shoes made with leather from Swedish tannery Tärnsjö.
CREDIT: H&M





Actress Vanessa Paradis launched Conscious at H&M, part of the company's commitment to a more sustainable fashion future.

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