



Exotic appeal

Most of the time, luxury leathergoods brands, like the rest of the leather industry, use sheep, goat and especially bovine raw material to make their products. For almost all of them, though, exotic leather holds an enduring appeal. This sets out a range of very special supply chain considerations.

In May this year, luxury brand Hermès became the latest company forced to defend its use of leather. At its annual general meeting in Paris, a representative of an animal rights group accused the French brand of sourcing the ostrich leather used in some of its handbags from a farm in South Africa that had been caught on video mistreating live birds. Hermès responded by insisting that it only sources ostrich leather from tanneries rather than farms and has no relationship with the offending establishment. This publicity stunt on behalf of the campaign group highlighted the importance of transparency and traceability to the leather industry as a whole and perhaps even more so when it comes to exotics.

Ostrich industry transparency

Frik Kriek, marketing director of the South Cape Ostrich Tanning (SCOT) company in South Africa, says that it is important for the ostrich leather industry to be transparent in the face of “emotional attacks” such as this one against Hermès. Owned by the Mosstrich Group, a prominent supplier of ostrich meat as well as skins, SCOT has a long-standing and strong

relationship with the French company. It relies on SCOT to maintain transparency and traceability in its process so that there can be no doubt that the material Hermès uses is produced in an ethical way.

“Ostrich leather and the whole supply chain from farm to shelf is probably the most transparent exotic leather you can find,” explains Mr Kriek. Although retailers and consumers are “generally positive” about ostrich leather, luxury brands don’t use nearly as much of it as he would like. “It is a big frustration for us as an industry that ostrich leather is not part of more fashion houses’ annual collections,” he adds.

The advantage that ostrich leather has over other exotics is that the trading of it is not restricted by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). This convention was drafted in 1973 to address the decline in some reptile populations due to excessive and unregulated hunting during the 1960s and 1970s. Among the animals it included were various species of crocodilians (crocodiles, alligators and caimans) and it put restrictions on the trading of the skins of these reptiles in an effort to stabilise their populations.



An exotic leather showroom in Paris, set up by the Amtan and White Line, was established to give European designers the chance to view the latest alligator and crocodile leather.

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Crocodile conservation

Professor Grahame Webb, chairman of the Crocodile Specialist Group (CSG), which plays a key role in conservation efforts, says that the CITES treaty prevented the industry from being responsible for the “widespread depletion of wild populations”. He adds that “the majority of the industry is now clearly legal, sustainable and verifiable”.

He admits that opposition from animal rights groups and their attempts to provoke “moral outrage” have given those within the industry a problem over the years. Nevertheless, he insists that the critically important issue of animal welfare has come on “leaps and bounds over the past 30-40 years”, especially from a “science-based” perspective.

There are good examples of the leather industry helping to preserve the population of certain species by providing a strong financial incentive to make breeding initiatives sustainable and successful. A new programme has recently been announced to protect a particular crocodile species in Mexico. It consists of a joint initiative between the Responsible Ecosystems Sourcing Platform (RESP) and Mexico’s national commission of biodiversity CONABIO and aims to boost the numbers of Morelet crocodiles living in the wild. It hopes to encourage the communities living near wild Morelets to look after the reptile’s natural habitat and wants to establish “a production system” for the skins that makes sure a fair share of the economic benefit goes back to the local communities.

Professor Webb says that the crocodile leather industry is crucial to the livelihoods of people in these communities. By offering commercial incentives, such as land owners being able to sell the eggs retrieved from their property, communities can be



The joint initiative between RESP and CONABIO is crucial to the future of the Morelet crocodile, whose distinct scale marking make it a popular choice for luxury leathers goods.

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convinced to support the sustainability initiatives. He believes that “the commercial value of crocodiles today has proved to be a key factor in encouraging landowners to look after crocodiles”.

RESP has developed an identification system that uses biometric image recognition software to record the unique characteristics of each crocodile skin. This information is



The early tagging of skins is important in ensuring the transparency and traceability of the exotic leather industry.

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Due to the complexity of working with exotic leather much of it must be done by hand, making it a very labour intensive process.

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available in an online database and it allows companies along the supply chain to verify that the skin they are working with is from a sustainable source and was not illegally hunted. RESP and CONABIO are also working on a protocol to govern the farming of the crocodiles. These guidelines will use data on the population of the species and the conditions of its habitat to establish sustainable egg harvest quotas. This will define the number of eggs that those in the local community are permitted to extract, how best to do so and advice on how to incubate the eggs and transport them to farms. By involving local people in the process and showing them there can be a financial incentive, RESP and CONABIO hope to encourage them to help in the conservation effort. The eggs they are permitted to collect will be relocated to special incubation centres, where the chance of their hatching will be 95% (compared to a 10% chance if the eggs are left in the wild).

Professor Webb of the CSG believes that captive breeding programmes have improved the chances of survival for crocodiles. He points out that a key advantage is that a programme can be conducted anywhere, even far from wild populations, and is not affected by any fluctuations in wild populations or destruction of habitat. Alejandra Garcia Naranjo, conservation and sustainable use specialist at RESP, tells *World Leather* that if international trade in reptile skins is managed effectively and legally, it can provide employment and financial incentives that help “deliver positive conservation and sustainable development results”.

Alligator conservation

There are similar conservation efforts to protect another crocodilian species that is a popular source of exotic leather – the American alligator. Christy Plott of the American Tanning and Leather (Amtan) company, a family-run business specialising in reptile skins, says that the alligator industry should be seen as the “worldwide standard” for conservation because those within the

sector have contributed significantly to the survival of a species that was once on the endangered list. From conservation of their habitats to research into diseases that can afflict them, she says that industry participants have led the way in preserving the future of these creatures.

The American alligator was listed as endangered in 1967 as a result of persistent and unchecked poaching. This continued well into the 1970s but concerted conservation efforts since then have saved the species and careful farming and wildlife management means that there are now more than two million wild American alligators in the state of Louisiana alone. It's difficult to get alligators to breed in captivity. As a result, conservation efforts must involve capturing the eggs laid in the wild before they hatch. Farmers who capture the eggs incubate them to hatchlings and are then required to put up to 20% of the hatchlings back into the nesting habitat. The rest can be sold to provide economic benefits.

The harvesting of both wild and farmed alligators is highly regulated, as with crocodiles, in line with the CITES agreement. Each property that has an alligator hunting permit is only allowed to collect a certain number of alligators and eggs, calculated from the size of the wild population. All live gators in farms must be immediately tagged with a government-issued number that has to remain attached to the tail until the skin is turned into finished leather.

As with crocodiles, the key to getting landowners on board with efforts to protect the alligator habitat is to offer financial incentives and make an alligator a valuable commodity.

Exotic leather showroom

Amtan announced a strategic partnership with Italian exotic leather supplier White Line in 2012 which saw the Georgia-based company stop selling directly to brands and instead provide its alligator leather to White Line at crust stage; White Line had previously lacked a steady supply of crust for turning



Preventing the intricate skills needed to handle exotic leather from disappearing is one of the biggest challenges faced by those within the industry today.

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into finished leather. The two partners believe this set-up creates “an atmosphere for faster and more efficient skin-to-market execution” allowing them to respond quickly to the needs of Europe’s designers and also react to any changes in trends.

An extension of this partnership was the establishment of a showroom in the heart of Paris displaying high-quality exotic leather. This project was launched in 2015 and aimed to give designers and brands the chance to view the latest alligator and crocodile leather that the Amtan/White Line partnership has produced. Having exhibited together at European leather shows including *Première Vision*, they realised that there was a demand from French designers and fashion houses for a more permanent location. French firm *Compagnie des Tanneurs* has since joined Amtan and White Line in this venture, adding its considerable experience of selling leather in Paris and to the French market as a whole.

According to Ms Plott, the appeal of exotic leather is in its “delicate beauty”. The limited number of skins available means that there is competition along the whole supply chain, starting from the farmers who compete to retrieve the alligator eggs in the US to the brands themselves. The difficulty that the brands have in securing a reliable supply of exotic leather has led to some of them investing in farms or tanneries to get ahead of their rivals. French group Kering is one such brand to do so, having purchased the France Coco crocodile tannery in 2013 to gain an earlier foothold on the supply chain. The brand said this move would allow it to “further secure a sustainable supply of high-quality crocodile skins”.

Skills gap

Ms Plott explains that it takes considerable skill to produce leather from the skin of an alligator. She estimates that there are fewer than 10 people in the world capable of producing “a quality glazed alligator skin”. She adds that the potential cost of a mistake during production is much higher than when working

with a conventional bovine hide. Due to the absence of machines capable of processing reptile skins in large quantities, much of it must be done by hand, making it a very labour-intensive process. The tags that are attached to reptile skins for conservation purposes mean it is impossible to process them by machine.

She acknowledges that a lack of training programmes on exotics means there is a risk that the skills required to sustain the industry are dying out. At the moment, Amtan understandably wants to keep the knowledge it has in-house and is especially reluctant to share it outside of the US.

Returning to ostrich, Mr Kriek at SCOT says there are definitely specific skills required to work with the skins his company processes. He insists that those within the ostrich business, including his organisation, are “continually training people” so that they are able to fill senior positions in the future and prevent the creation of a skills gap which would negatively impact the industry.

Perhaps having predominantly solved the problems of traceability and sustainability, this now is the biggest challenge facing the exotic leather sector: preserving the skills needed to produce the material that luxury fashion houses continue to value so highly. 🌐



The distinctive qualities of exotic leathers (such as the quill marks of ostrich leather) are an important part of the appeal for brands and consumers.

CREDIT: COMPAGNIE DES TANNEURS