

Sustainability - more than just a word in fashion

First of all Happy New Year to everybody with the wish that the industry can finally stop complaining and look forward to an industrially rich and profitable 2018.

As is my habit, the first article of the year is intended to be positive without too much criticism, and also this January I would like to stick to this tradition.

Sustainability is the new fashion word and I looked it up in *Wikipedia* to see what it actually means at the industrial level it is worth quoting relevant passages here:

In ecology, sustainability (from sustain and ability) is the property of biological systems to remain diverse and productive indefinitely. Long-lived and healthy wetlands and forests are examples of sustainable biological systems. In more general terms, sustainability is the endurance of systems and processes. The organising principle for sustainability is sustainable development, which includes four interconnected domains: ecology, economics, politics and culture. Sustainability science is the study of sustainable development and environmental science. Sustainability can also be defined as a socio-ecological process characterised

by the pursuit of a common ideal. An ideal is by definition unattainable in a given time and space. However, by persistently and dynamically approaching it, the process results in a sustainable system.

So let us look into the mirror and ask ourselves the question: is the leather industry sustainable or not? Apart from a still too large number of unbelievable and unacceptable cases, the leather industry as a whole is, in my opinion, sustainable. There is no question in my mind that in all of Europe, North, Central and South America, Oceania and most of the Middle and Far East the leather industry is sustainable.

There is also no doubt in my mind that the industry is not sustainable in countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh as well as most of Africa, with the exception of South Africa. Many, particularly in Pakistan, probably also in Ethiopia, will now strongly object, but in their hearts these objectors know that they have a long long way to go to achieve sustainability. Driving around in areas such as Sialkot or Korangi, not to mention Savar or 99% of the African leather industry



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locations, just to name a few, makes you want to empty your stomach and join the anti-leather movement. But those are the exceptions, not the rule.

There is incessant criticism from action groups and holier-than-thou so-called celebrities, which we are incapable of or unwilling to tackle seriously on a global scale; they point at what they insist is the unsustainability of the leather industry, and the fashion dictators are walking away from leather for their shoes, bags and garments. The producers of reptile leather in particular are facing a serious decline in orders and blame smart watches for the sharp reduction in the sales of crocodile leather for watchstraps. Luckily upholstery and automotive industries are moving more and more towards leather so the losses in the shoe industry will be partly or totally absorbed, even if not all production countries produce the quality of leather that is required for upholstery.

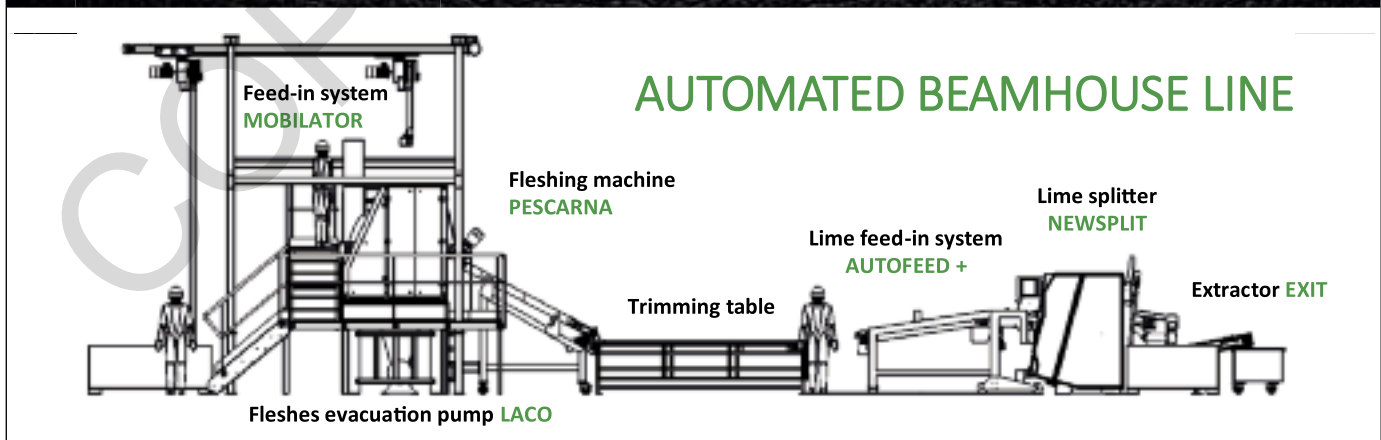
The fortunate problem we are facing now is that the world economy is improving and that means that more and more people will be able to afford to buy meat. More people will feel compelled to demonstrate their improved social status by eating meat, so we are seeing and will see, provided the economy continues to grow, an increased availability of raw hides and skins, something already mentioned by David Peters in his column in September 2017. If we have more

hides and less demand for leather, it could mean that prices will drop. I would be very curious to know whether we'd go back to 2008 when European slaughterhouses paid traders to take their hides and when you could buy good-quality East African wet-salted hides and have them delivered to your door for 25 cents per kilo.

At the same time there is a trend, particularly in the so-called developed countries, to eat less red meat with the number of vegetarians and vegans on the rise, but I doubt if this can counter-balance the increased meat consumption based on the improved economy.

The above has brought us to the starting point of the value chain: the farms, the animals and the slaughterhouses. To go back to the article's title, how sustainable are they? The answer is simple: in the developed world, with a few exceptions, farms and slaughterhouses are sustainable, even if open to improvement. A healthy, well kept and well treated animal will give good-quality milk and meat and, as a premium, also a decent quality hide or skin. Many farms are now computer-assisted with an animal database in which all the animals' vaccinations, illnesses and other relevant information are recorded.

Once the animal has reached maturity it is transported to a meat processing plant by a legally compliant means of transport. Farmers or transport companies do not always



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follow the rules but by and large the system is compliant and hence sustainable. Once the animal reaches the meat facility it should be properly treated and stunned before it is sacrificed. In recent months we have seen that this is not always the case but again by and large the system works. It is to be noted that the animal's ear tags or other means of identification originating at the farm's database will now identify its meat and hide or skin. In short we have traceability in place from the farm to exit from the slaughterhouse, which is by itself a contribution to the sustainability of the value chain. The slaughterhouse should have a proper effluent treatment plant in place or a facility to treat directly or indirectly the effluent, as well as waste and by-products from meat production.

This is where the leather industry takes possession of its raw materials. Salt is one of the most difficult substances to remove from the tannery effluent and suppliers are now exploring ways to avoid or at least reduce the quantity of salt used in conservation, which is another important contribution to the sustainability of the sector. For their part, modern tanneries remove as much salt as possible before the hides and skins enter chemical processing.

The raw materials at this point enter the tannery and this is where we find the highest number of issues that can influence the sustainability of the sector. The main

sustainability issue in a tannery is the proper management of chemicals, their sustainable use and the constant research to process leather with the consumption of fewer natural resources through advanced technologies both in terms of the chemical and mechanical processes. Elimination or at least drastic reduction of dangerous chemicals, substitution of chemicals that are used in high volumes by advanced products that can be used in lower quantities, and the research for alternative products that will weigh less heavily on effluent treatment plants is required.

A lot has been done and that is why I insist that the leather value chain is, by and large, sustainable, but that doesn't mean that we can sit back and congratulate ourselves on a job well done. What has been done is to be considered the beginning of a never-ending cycle. We can improve by using less energy, fewer chemicals, produce less effluent and market products that at their life's end will easily, quickly and safely degrade.

Important or even indispensable is that we market ourselves in this light, that we get the message across to the general public, who may now be influenced by all the negative publicity, that this industry is going out of its way to be ahead of the crowd by continuously innovating. And, yes, we should also put pressure on those countries where the industry has a black mark on its reputation. 🌍



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