



No shame at all

A very happy, healthy and prosperous 2019 to all. We have closed a (for the leather industry) very disappointing 2018, with myriad challenges, of which the most important was the market situation with leather being out of fashion. Let us be optimistic and look at 2019 as the year of the comeback.

In my career in the leather industry I think that I have seen it all, but what is happening in Bangladesh at the new tanning area in Savar is beyond belief. There is no shame. The Savar-Hemayetpur area was badly designed and served more to line pockets than to serve the Bangladeshi leather industry. The common effluent treatment plant (CETP) is badly designed, almost worthless and definitely not doing the job it was meant to do. A lot of money was wasted and rather than putting things right, the government is not treating the matter as urgent.

But even if the CETP is transformed into an operative unit, the drainage from the tanneries to the CETP will still be totally inadequate, something that I reported two years ago. The inadequate capacity of the drainage system is now highlighted by the fact that new drainage channels have been dug in the sand along the main road (it's a mud track in the sand, with no pavement) in the tanning area, where tanneries

dump their effluent in the same way as they did in the old tanning area of Hazaribagh, with the difference being that the Hazaribagh drains were made of concrete, whereas the Savar-Hemayetpur drains are not protected and hence the drained effluent filters through the sand into the lower layers. Ultimately it will find its way into the water table after having polluted layers of sand with chrome and other chemicals.

It is unbelievable that local tannery owners have no shame whatsoever and are dumping without hesitation their waste in the open air, into unprotected ground, knowing that they are causing an environmental disaster. It is unbelievable that local authorities don't implement the laws of the country. It is unbelievable that there is no policing that puts a halt to this nightmare.

I am continuing to bang on about this subject, at the risk of boring you, to create awareness even at the cost of tanneries closing, in spite of the huge investments made. In my view, health is more important than making money. I hope that brands and importers of leather and leathergoods who read this will let their conscience count and refuse to buy from Bangladesh, teaching the tanners the hard way to become compliant. Some brands are already refusing to buy from tanneries in Savar-Hemayetpur and I hope that others will



follow this example.

Buyers, you have a very big responsibility here: let your power and conscience speak, not profit. A few tanners, understanding the seriousness of the situation, have petitioned the government for permission to build their own effluent treatment plants on their premises and at first this was refused, but last November the government allowed three tanners to design and construct their own effluent treatment plants, leaving the door open for other tanneries to follow suit, and confirming that the CETP is an abomination. This initiative is to be applauded, but only if the private effluent treatment plants come under strict, objective scientific control and are not a ruse to fool the world.

It really angers me that in 2019 there is so little respect for fellow citizens and for the environment and I will continue to press the point.

I've got that off my chest.

On to other topics

I received an email with a signed letter attached which reads as follows:

Dear Sam,

We, ASBA Hides, Zambia, would like to hereby inform and share the various benefits that we gained by installing and implementing a static flaying plant. The various benefits derived by installing the hides flaying frames are:

- *The hides are now 100% machine-flayed hides*
- *Increase in the speed and efficiency of removing the hide from the carcass*
- *No meat on the hide*
- *No flay cuts and holes on the hides*

Currently, we have installed the static flaying frames in five abattoirs. The tannery we have a supply contract with is currently only working on processing the machine-flayed hides to wet blue stage and is finding market demand for these improved hides.

We are working on channels to install the hide-flaying system in 20 abattoirs in Zambia. We firmly believe that we can make all Zambian-origin hides 100% machine-flayed hides, which will in turn help sustain production the Pan African Leather Limited Tannery in Zambia.

This is the way to do it! This is the private initiative of a trader who contacted me and asked for the drawings of the static flaying frame. He did not ask anybody for money, only my support and advice, which I have happily given. The results that he reports are great, particularly because he did it all himself without the usual genius institutions like UN agencies, NGOs or ALLPI who first look at their own benefits.

Zambia was on the receiving end of several hide and skin projects over the last 20 years or so but had not taken a single step forward in terms of hide and skin quality, in spite of the various workshops, strategies and other rubbish. This

company invested its own money through its own initiative and is happy that the static flaying frame worked as advertised. It wants to take the next step and install 20 more. Now that is development with a capital D; it is a change of mentality from asking for handouts to creating business.

These are results that have not been achieved before various NGOs financed static flaying frames but, due to the fact that the benefiting abattoir had not paid for it itself, it had no incentive to make it work. My sincere congratulations to ASBA Hides, hoping that this example will be followed by other hide and skin dealers on the African continent. Anyone who wants to follow this example, just email me and I will give you the construction drawings totally free, provided it is for private not commercial use and not supported by or in collaboration with the UN and NGOs.

...and another thing

Last subject to start the New Year. It relates to my November article in which I criticised the industry for its lack of addressing the consumers of leather and leathersgoods.

Here is one example of getting the message through directly to consumers:

Director of the University of Cincinnati's Leather Research Laboratory, Steven Lange, appeared on local television in the US at the end of 2017 to explain the difference between leather and so-called 'bonded leather'. He gave an expert opinion on the contrasts between the two materials on a programme that seeks to give advice to consumers.

The programme had received a complaint from a consumer in Georgia who was disappointed by the degradation of the upholstery on a five-year-old sofa that he had been told was made from leather. Instead, the material used on the \$1,500 sofa was bonded leather.

Steven Lange explained that bonded leather is small pieces of leather scraps, pressed into place and held together chemically. He said: "With natural leather, the grain will make little wrinkles when you fold it. With the bonded leather product you are not going to have that look at all. It's like a smooth sheet of plastic. Once people know the difference between real and bonded they will want real leather."

After the programme aired, Stephen Sothmann, president of the US Hide, Skin and Leather Association, said: "It was a really great piece. We will all need to do more of this type of work in the future as we seek to defend and promote our industry."

Dear Stephen and all other readers, that's what I have been saying for the last couple of years: we have to stop talking to ourselves. We need to talk to the people who buy our products, the consumers. They should go to a shop and ask for leather because we have told them how beautiful, sustainable and healthy leather is, with proven facts and not smoke-screens or half-truths. Steven Lange has shown us the way. Let us follow his example. 🌍