



The Whale in the Room

Eating healthy is a worthy goal and being a vegetarian or even a vegan is a respected way to conduct one's life. Ensuring that your body receives only certain types of food is important to sustaining a healthy lifestyle. But vegetarians and vegans sometimes go beyond the food and health aspects of their lifestyle and try to influence others or proselytise their belief in non-meat diets. There is a growing perception that these 'food-biased' groups are trying to suggest that any other lifestyle is not only wrong but dangerous to society. We bear witness to a multitude of NGOs and groups who endlessly beat the drum that their way is better and that anything else is wrong.

Perhaps surprisingly to those who are reading this column, I can sympathise with vegetarians and vegans. Plant-based foods, while not appealing to me personally, are something that a significant number of people embrace. What is equally surprising is that I cannot find any statements that suggest this group is anti-plastic. There is no clear connection between a potentially carcinogenic substrate and living a so-called healthy lifestyle. Must we assume that being vegan equates to endorsing polyvinyl chloride (PVC) products? Is having Alcantara seat covers, made up of about 68% polyester and 32% polyurethane, saving the planet?

There appears to be an obvious dilemma and also hypocrisy when the solution to avoiding animal proteins is to endorse synthetic products that can pollute, destroy and kill the very animals these groups are suggesting we save.

When will our many leather and hide organisations start riding this pony?

Easy ride for plastics

I am an advocate of animal welfare. There is a need to correctly, appropriately and, most importantly, humanely harvest our proteins. Sanitary conditions and a safe workplace are priorities when it comes to how meat processing plants must operate. In recent consumer surveys all these characteristics have been shown to resonate when beef purchasing decisions are being made. So, why aren't the same standards and rules applied to plastic and synthetics?

I am specifically referring to the growing problem of plastic waste ending up in our oceans and impacting the health of our pinnipeds, cetaceans, sirenians and polar bears – otherwise known as sea mammals. There is a clear double standard between animal welfare prior to harvest and the impact on animals of consumer negligence.

It is doubtful that any leathergoods are being dumped into the sea and consumed by whales or other marine life. I am yet to see breaking news of a tragedy initiated by a group of reckless tanners secretly dumping Birkin bags in the ocean. In fact, lobsters are known to favour raw hides as a supplement to their nourishment. The prospect of the delicacy of a fresh hide-feeding venerable crustacean should motivate hide entrepreneurs to investigate alternative avenues for hide usage.

It is preposterous that our esteemed associations constantly defend against the various consumer groups and anti-leather organisations while ignoring that more damage is being done to society and our planet by the carcinogen reproducing amalgamation people.





Alphabet soup

The proposed merger of two US leather industry bodies – the US Hide, Skin and Leather Association (USHSLA) and Leather Industries of America (LIA) – represents a unique opportunity to reshape how the hide and leather industry operates. It cannot and should not be viewed as a “same old, same old” approach but as the first chance in recent memory to rewrite the rules about how the leather supply chain interacts.

There should be no space for backroom clubs or secret deals as the buyer and seller of this natural raw material argue over the status quo. It appears to me that there is a potential bias in favour of the hide side of the arrangement, however. Positioning the seller of a raw material ahead of the manufacturer would not reflect favourably on the long-term success or viability of this new association. While foxes and chicken coups come to mind, we should focus on the opportunity to rebuild an industry that has been vanishing.

Without a viable tanning industry, the downward momentum of hide prices will continue. It is therefore essential that this merger results in a clear and meaningful strategy that can serve as the foundation for developing the leather business. There is a hierarchy that the trustees of this association should never forget: leather is first. Hides are merely a raw material from which leather is manufactured.

Supply is no longer king; the jungle has a new ruler and it is man-made. Competition is from synthetics, i.e. plastics. It is also from cotton, denim, canvas and any other substrate not removed from an animal. Producers should recognise that they have the responsibility to find ways to better value their by-product. Today, the by-product requires all sellers to break out of their historical moulds, forget the status quo and embrace the changing paradigm of how hides are sold, processed and marketed.

We urgently need a feasible tanning industry, preferably based in regions that respect the rule of law. We need respectful commercial relationships where the sanctity of a contract is protected and enforced on both sides. Shippers should be open and transparent when describing and selling their products. Contracts should not be a means for defence and protection. Sellers should be responsible for their deliveries and be held accountable for bait-and-switch tactics.

This nine-lettered merger of acronyms should have big aspirations and formulate a strategic plan that incorporates governance, compliance and recourse and that can become the model for other global tanning centres. We should set fire to the existing hide conventions and from the ashes create a mutually agreeable code which all constituents agree to follow. As a charismatic representative of one of the major packers likes to say: “Go big or go home”.

No more walls

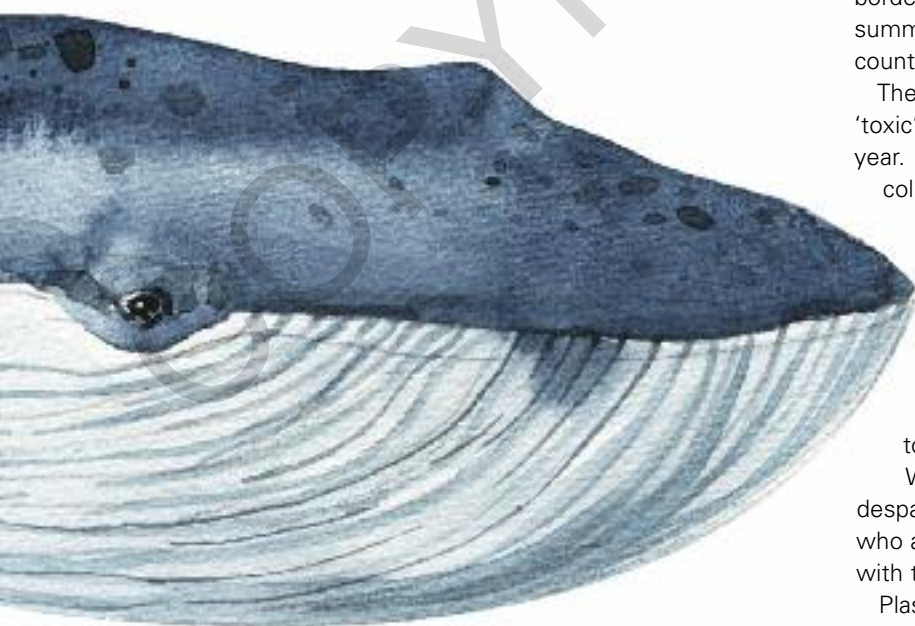
Our industry is global and so any major economic or political shift has an effect on our ability to conduct transactions internationally. With over 90% of US hides being exported, a result of the demise of the domestic tanning industry, we are obligated to nurture relationships with customers around the world. We encourage exports for each of our companies, and we welcome imports for many of the finished product businesses. This situation is managed by lobbying government to accommodate the free flow of goods and services, negate restrictions and be receptive to open borders.

Our hide pioneers, who worked diligently to develop trading lanes and to bridge both cultural and economic divides, created a legacy that has been inherited by today's organisations. It is therefore disappointing to witness the current administration's policy of erecting barriers that clearly impede the economic flow of trade. Building barriers at our borders impedes trade. We are reminded of an event in the summer of 1987 when a US president told his Soviet Union counterpart: “Tear down this wall!”

The Oxford Dictionary Word of the Year for 2018 was ‘toxic’, chosen to reflect the mood and preoccupation of last year. As well as aptly describing the ramifications of the collapse of hide prices, it also correctly describes the consequences of synthetic lifestyle. Our hide and leather industries have been decimated by artificial materials that are misleadingly marketed (e.g. imitation, alternative, blended, bonded, etc.). Many of these are promoted by the groups whose default mode is to endorse animal-free diets while at the same time contaminating the environment they claim to protect.

We are certain that Ishmael's narrative of Ahab's despair* is analogous to the anti-animal protein promoters who are willing to contaminate and destroy the environment with their use of synthetic materials.

Plastic is causing death while leather is for the living. 🌱



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**Moby Dick*, Herman Melville