



OUR ENVIRONMENT

NO FLUFF

Is wearing down set to become as controversial as wearing animal fur? As animal welfare charity PETA campaigns for it to be banned, Sarah Stirling finds out the facts behind the feathers.

Down has revolutionised the outdoor world. But can we take it for granted that it'll always be available? As Mountain Equipment's down catalogue points out: "We have built the pyramids, split the atom and been to the moon, yet the humble down from geese and ducks remains the best insulating material that we have." Our story begins back in 2012, when two surprising things happened simultaneously to shake up the down world. Firstly, animal welfare charities threw outdoor gear companies to the media hounds by exposing where down really came from: "An investigation by The Sunday Times has traced the source of The North Face's feathers to geese kept on intensive farms in Hungary. The birds are artificially fattened by having funnels pushed into their beaks, and then large amounts of boiled corn mash are forced down their throats using a pressurised air hose." If you own a pre-2012 down jacket or sleeping bag, chances are high there's some down from birds that had suffered a short, brutish life of force-feeding jostling around in there. After all, down is a by-product of the meat industry and, though banned in UK supermarkets, foie gras is still popular elsewhere. As if this life of misery couldn't get any worse, another practice was exposed: to maximise down output, some farm birds were regularly 'live-plucked'.



Down and out: Maria Pilariski on the Zugspitze, Bavaria, Germany.

PHOTO: ANDRÉS BEREGÓVIC.

PHOTO: MOUNTAIN EQUIPMENT



A farmer in Western Russia. Down supply chain audit, 2014.

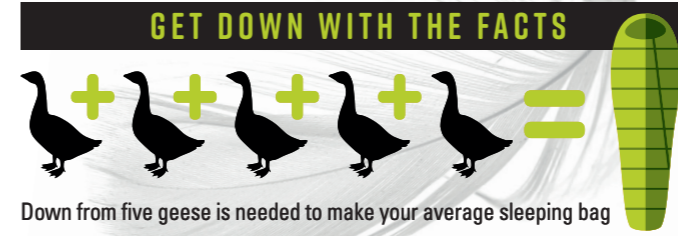


Birds in China able to exhibit natural behaviour. Down supply chain audit, 2011.

PHOTO: VIER PFOTEN INTERNATIONAL



PHOTO: MOUNTAIN EQUIPMENT



Young ducklings at a hatchery in China. Down supply chain audit, 2016.

PHOTO: MOUNTAIN EQUIPMENT

INTERVIEW WITH A VEGAN

I wheeled in Frank Thompson, a vegan cyclist-mountaineer from Bristol, to ask some awkward questions.

PHOTO: VIER PFOTEN INTERNATIONAL



Live plucking of a White Goose in Hungary 2010.

Frank Thompson: Down farms are notified before they are audited. Can they clean their act up for one day?

Richard Talbot, Director of Product, Mountain Equipment: We are fully committed to carrying out audits without notice, but at present have conducted our audits in conjunction with the prior approval of our supply chains. That said, all must have signed up to be willing to accept unannounced visits in order to work with us.

Ashley Gill, Integrity Specialist at RDS: "The first year, our audits are announced. In following years, at least half of all farms audits must be semi-announced (72 hours' notice or announcing a two-month window, during which the auditor may arrive at any time). Force-feeding requires large equipment that could not be removed quickly. The evidence of live-plucking birds also lasts at least six weeks."

Corley Kenna, PR Director at Patagonia: "The complexity of the down supply chain does not allow for a one-day clean-up of practices to pass audits."

PHOTO: VIER PFOTEN INTERNATIONAL

Why were outdoor gear companies, whose staff tend to care about nature, buying down from wildfowl farms like this? Despite many of them worrying about saving rainforests and making fleeces out of recycled bottles, it turned out that only two outdoor brands really knew where their down came from. Then, videos of gruesome foie gras production and farm-workers standing on birds' necks while ripping their feathers out went viral.

Once they'd set them squawking in panic, welfare charities gave gear companies a few year's grace to track down where all their down came from and to revolutionise bird-farming practices around the world. And if they failed? Campaigns would kick off even harder, demanding that down be banned, like animal fur.

Fast forward to the present: are there now viral videos of happy ducks and geese splashing about on ponds? Apparently not. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) recently renewed their anti-down campaign, claiming not much has changed. So what has happened since then?

WHERE DOES DOWN COME FROM?

Immediately after the media exposes in 2012, Steve Richardson, then Head of Material Development at proudly-ethical company Patagonia, set off to track down some of the farms supplying their down, then put his hands up. The Telegraph reported his response from Hungary: "There was no doubt that these geese were used to make foie gras."

So why didn't most outdoor gear companies know where their down was coming from? Let's imagine for a second, Kristian the Hungarian down collector, or Lei Wei the Chinese one pulling into the dusty yard of a local family. There are a handful of birds, amongst other livestock, wandering around. Some have just been killed for their meat, so he's come

to pick up a bag of down. Earlier, the farmer's wife used a sticky wax to rip feathers and down from the bird carcasses, before washing them in a basic detergent. There are maybe 50 families in his local area who have a handful of birds. Once he's collected all the down that's going, he'll sell it onto a wholesaler. This is a collection-based down supply chain — a very common way that down begins its journey to your wardrobe.

Basically, trying to trace where a jacket's worth of down has come from is an Odyssean feat, ending in thousands of tiny family-run bird-farms in distant lands where they don't necessarily share our Western empathy with animals. 80% of the world's down comes from China, and much of the rest from Eastern Europe. It seemed an impossible task to trace and monitor down supply. But then surprise number two happened. Just after the fluffy stuff erupted all over prodding journalists, and while other outdoor brands were scratching their heads, Cheshire-based brand Mountain Equipment (ME) calmly launched a website called Down Codex.

They'd seen the animal welfare storm approaching from Germany back in 2009, when charities over there started kicking off about down. Since then, Mountain Equipment told me, they had been reforming their supply chain. Back then, small Scandi-brand Fjallraven were the only others who'd attempted to trace their down. How did they do it?

MOUNTAIN EQUIPMENT'S DOWN CODEX

Thinking outside the box, the British brand employed the International Down and Feather Testing Laboratory (IDFL) to visit slaughterhouses and farms in their supply chain, and make reports on what went on, complete with photographic evidence. As down testers, IDFL were already active on the ground and knowledgeable. No experts in farming, Mountain Equipment's staff then pored over the RSPCA's Freedom Food initiative, and came up with a set of reasonable rules about bird welfare. Reading the animal rights riot act to disbelieving Chinese and Hungarian farmers must have raised a few eyebrows, but gradually they cultivated their supply chain so they were only buying down that came from decently-treated birds.

Nowadays there's a code on every Mountain Equipment down product. Type this into their Down Codex website and you can find out what type of farm the down in it came from. It's not a new idea (Icebreaker launched Baacode in 2008) but it was a much bigger undertaking as wildfowl don't handily live on huge ranches in former English colonies. When the Down Codex website launched with impeccable timing in 2012, others began quietly coming to them for advice.

"VIDEOS OF GRUESOME FOIE GRAS PRODUCTION AND FARM-WORKERS STANDING ON BIRDS' NECKS RIPPING THEIR FEATHERS OUT WENT VIRAL"

Frank Thompson: "Birds are supposed to be stunned before they are killed, but I read that many are still conscious when entering the scalding tank."

Ashley Gill: "We require guidelines to be followed during the slaughter process, including ensuring that equipment for stunning is in good working order and that animals do not regain consciousness before they are killed."

Corley Kenna: "The TDS standard includes strict requirements on animal welfare beyond force-feeding and live-plucking, in order to ensure humane practices at every stage of the birds' lives."

Richard Talbot: "It is very easy to make generalisations about farming practices in other parts of the world. Here in the UK and in Europe we have some of the strictest animal husbandry standards in the world. That in itself doesn't stop individual cases of bad practice."

Frank Thompson: "I don't agree that down has no viable replacement. I have an arctic-rated synthetic insulated jacket which has served me well for five years."

Richard Talbot: "We have yet to see any synthetic wadding or blown fibre that can replicate the properties of down. Down, sourced correctly, has the potential to be an entirely sustainable and appropriate source, provided you accept that down comes from birds that are killed. For those of us who eat meat, it would be hypocritical to suggest otherwise. Using synthetic alternatives are not without their own flaws. If virgin material, they invariably make use of oil and other natural resources. Whether virgin or recycled they have the potential to lead to waste and landfill, and also to synthetic microfibres entering the environment (perhaps one of the next big environmental campaigns)."

Corley Kenna: "We respect but do not share the vegan view on animal welfare. Vegans may opt out of moral difficulties by avoiding any human use of domesticated animals. For the rest of us, the question is more complex. We must do everything we can to ensure that animals live as full a life as possible before they are slaughtered compassionately for food."

GET DOWN WITH THE FACTS

Performance-wise, goose offers larger cluster sizes. However, there's an overlap. The best duck down easily surpasses the poorest goose down for performance.

 = 100g One goose typically provides around 100g of down

THE MURKY ISSUE

From the outside, it looked like the outdoor industry was doing a great job. Then, last year, PETA made us all wince with another live-plucking video, claiming the down featured was in the Responsible Down Standard supply chain. Some digging revealed the problem: a loophole. Some slaughterhouses and suppliers are processing certified down alongside non-certified down or, even worse, down that knowingly stems from force-fed or live-plucked geese. As PETA pointed out this, "makes already-complex supply chains even murkier."

It is a murky business, but reserve judgment for a moment, and consider these two things. Firstly, changing culture has to happen in small steps. Secondly, PETA's refusal to engage with outdoor brands is counter-productive to making this change happen. They just want down banned, and that's it, black and white.

Four years ago, Four Paws were similarly refusing to co-operate. At the time, Richard Talbot had told me: "They don't want to provide any constructive input into down supply, just to prevent use of down." Now things have changed: Four Paws have gone from brand-bashing to brainstorming with brands, which has been beneficial for both sides, and for bird welfare.

Nina Jamal from Four Paws commented: "The developments have been tremendous. When Four Paws and PETA released our exposés, barely any brand knew where their down really came from, let alone the farms where the animals were raised. There was no real traceability. Now a fair amount of unannounced audits are taking place and the chain of custody is being closely tracked."

Her opinion on the recent PETA campaign? She explains that, initially, there wasn't enough demand for certified down to persuade suppliers to change their practices. Now though, she thinks that is set to change.

"TRYING TO TRACE WHERE A JACKET'S WORTH OF DOWN HAS COME FROM IS AN ODYSSEAN FEAT"

THE BIGGER BEDDING ISSUE

You might think that outdoor gear companies should refuse to work with these farmers who duck the rules. However, chew on this figure: specialist outdoor brands in Europe and the US account for less than 1% of total down and feather production. How much leverage do you think they really have?

The down used by outdoor gear companies is essentially a by-product from a much bigger industry. Here's how it all works. In order to grade it, down is blown through a giant filter several times. Each time, certain weights of cluster are removed. The down used by outdoor brands is essentially the gold panned off the top: the highest fill power down. That gold wouldn't be available if the bedding industry wasn't buying huge quantities of lower-quality down.

Nina tells me that Four Paws have been negotiating hard with bedding brands, suppliers and shops since the beginning of 2016, making the point for stricter traceability. Before this date, she says, the majority of the bedding industry relied on a bird welfare standard called Downpass, which relied on "self declarations or certificates that barely included any farm controls."

At the end of October 2017, though, a new stricter version of Downpass was released, which Four Paws consider very close to the Responsible Down Standard, and they tell me the industry shift they have been working for is happening right now. Promisingly, Allied Feather and Down, the biggest supplier of down for outdoor, fashion and sport goods manufacture became 100% RDS or TDS certified as of November 2016. All this suggests that Four Paws have now generated enough leverage to change the system.



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“SOME SLAUGHTERHOUSES AND SUPPLIERS ARE PROCESSING CERTIFIED DOWN ALONGSIDE NON-CERTIFIED DOWN OR, EVEN WORSE, DOWN THAT KNOWINGLY STEMS FROM FORCE-FED OR LIVE-PLUCKED GEESE”

SO - WHICH DOWN CERTIFICATION SCHEME IS BEST?

Richard Talbot has been a mine of information about down, but I dig my heels in and corner him. I want to know if any of the farms in Mountain Equipment's Down Codex supply chain also sell down from live-plucked or force-fed birds.

“We aren't 100% sure,” he replies. “With our Russian goose source it is extremely unlikely. It's one slaughterhouse dealing with only a handful of self-contained farms. With our Asian source (which is also an RDS-certified source) I don't know, and the scales involved make it much harder to be sure.”

I contact Patagonia again, and hassle them with the same question. “No,” they reply. “The Traceable Down Standard does not allow for parallel production (keeping live-plucked or force-fed birds along with non-live-plucked and non-force-fed birds).”

But the issue is not clear-cut. Although it's much more difficult to manage, and change comes slowly, Mountain Equipment

and RDS's approach is improving bird-welfare on thousands of small farms the world over, without affecting the livelihoods of small family farmers.

“Birds on small family farms probably have the best informal welfare standards possible,” says Richard Talbot. “If I said, would you prefer to buy from the small local farm down the road, or the big industrial place 50 miles away, which would you go for? On the downside, it's very difficult to check living conditions on thousands of tiny farms.” Sourcing down only from big industrial farms, on the other hand, might make it easier to monitor what goes on, but may also encourage down suppliers to dump small farmers. “Farming on big scales potentially comes at the expense of other areas of welfare — all birds being barn-raised en-masse and so on,” says Richard. “I know Four Paws have similar concerns.” Patagonia argue that their standard has strict requirements on access to water, food and darkness, as well as air quality, temperature, and many other criteria.

I also hear, on the industry grapevine, that there is talk of a merger between RDS and TDS, which could work to the strengths of both approaches moving forwards.

ARE WE SO MUCH BETTER IN THE WEST?

Recently, Mountain Equipment pulled on their wellies and visited a British farm, Johnson and Swarbrick, which sells Goosnargh duck meat to high-end restaurants like Gordon Ramsay. “We felt that it was strange to impose restrictions on farms in China and Eastern Europe when we didn't know what is acceptable here,” explained Richard Talbot.

Even on this high-quality farm, they found that the barn-kept birds didn't have access to open water. I do some research, and find an in-depth report into this issue by the RSPCA, produced in 2015. The conclusion is: “The lack of access to open water is the most important welfare concern facing commercial ducks.” However, it's not mandatory here in the West. Many farm wildfowl only have access to drinking water through a drip-feeder. When Richard raised the issue with the farm representative, he was told that when they had tried free-range birds, it had resulted in a lot of deaths because “birds were caught out in storms.”

I think about this, and as plenty of disturbing viral videos



GET DOWN WITH THE FACTS

 **20%**

Most of a bird's commercial value is in its meat; 20% of its value comes from down

 **80%**

Over 80% of the waterfowl (down market) is taken up by ducks, not geese

PHOTO: MOUNTAIN EQUIPMENT

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show, while we may love our pets and wildlife, we can be just as guilty of treating farm animals as commodities rather than living creatures here in the West. We don't personally rip feathers out of birds, but how many of us are guilty of buying cheap cuts of meat at the supermarket? Are we really fooled by the label showing happy animals in a meadow?

I discuss the issue with Patagonia's Corley Kenna, and am impressed to find out that their down certification scheme is just the beginning. Their team is wading deep into this wider global issue, talking to experts including Dr Temple Grandin (professor of animal science at Colorado State University and consultant to the livestock industry), the Humane Society, Four Paws and seasoned field auditors in order to "develop a 21st Century moral standard for the ethical treatment of animals."

I'm left thinking that it's important not to just box-tick – 'no live-plucking' and 'no force-feeding' – and get back to play. Next time I put my down jacket on I'm going to be thinking about what's really needed here: a critical shift, worldwide, in thinking about the emotional and intellectual capacities of our fellow animals and birds, and what constitutes compassionate treatment. I'm also left feeling happy to be part of the outdoor industry, where players like Mountain Equipment and Patagonia are honest enough to put their hands up when they have missed something important, and are using their power to do some good and give back to the natural world. 🏔️



Words: Sarah Stirling
Sarah Stirling is a freelance journalist and Summit Assistant Editor.
[@sarahstirling](https://twitter.com/sarahstirling)

"WE FELT THAT IT WAS STRANGE TO IMPOSE RESTRICTIONS ON FARMS IN CHINA AND EASTERN EUROPE WHEN WE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT IS ACCEPTABLE HERE"

CHECK YOUR FAVE BRAND:

The Responsible Down Standard

Originally started by The North Face, now over 70 brands only use RDS-certified down including British brands Rab and Berghaus.

<http://responsibledown.org/find-responsible-down-standard>

Mountain Equipment Down Codex

There's a code on every Mountain Equipment down product so you can trace it.

www.thedowncodex.co.uk



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