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Lewis Bollard

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What Can We Learn From the Fur-Free Fight?

It seems like a good time to be a fur-bearing animal. In 2016, Giorgio Armani [succumbed](#) to years of protest and took his iconic brand fur-free. Gucci, Versace, Prada, Michael Kors, Burberry, and a half dozen other [major labels](#) followed suit.

So did politicians. Since 2017, [Belgium](#), [Croatia](#), the [Czech Republic](#), [Ireland](#), [Luxembourg](#), [Norway](#), and [Serbia](#) have either passed or implemented fur farming bans. This year, [Los Angeles](#) and [San Francisco](#) passed fur sales bans, as did the [California Assembly](#) (the ban is now in the state senate), while New York state and city lawmakers proposed bans.

Fur production and sales may also finally be in decline. Global statistics are unreliable, but fur sales appear to have peaked in 2014. And in fur's largest producer, China, ActAsia estimates that fur production fell from a 2014 high of 87M minks, foxes, and raccoon dogs slaughtered, down to 50M last year (see graph below).

China's production of fur pelts by year from 2010 to 2018 (units in millions)

Source: Statistical Report on the Production of Skins of Mink, Fox and Raccoon Dog in China. China Leather Industry Association (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018)



China, the world's largest fur producer, has seen substantial declines in mink numbers from 2014 to 2017.

Source: ActAsia analysis, based on China Leather Industry Association data.

This is welcome news. We focus on other farmed animals because of the tough triage of factory farming: while about 45M animals are suffering on fur farms at any time, [5.3B](#) mammals, [19.1B](#) birds, and [57.5B](#) fish are suffering on meat, egg, and fish farms. But fur animals may have it the worst, as wild animals typically confined to solitary cages, with some even [skinned alive](#). And fur seems uniquely

indefensible: [20-50](#) minks are farmed, collectively for 10 - 33 years, to produce just one fur coat, which retails for more than the global median per-capita annual income.

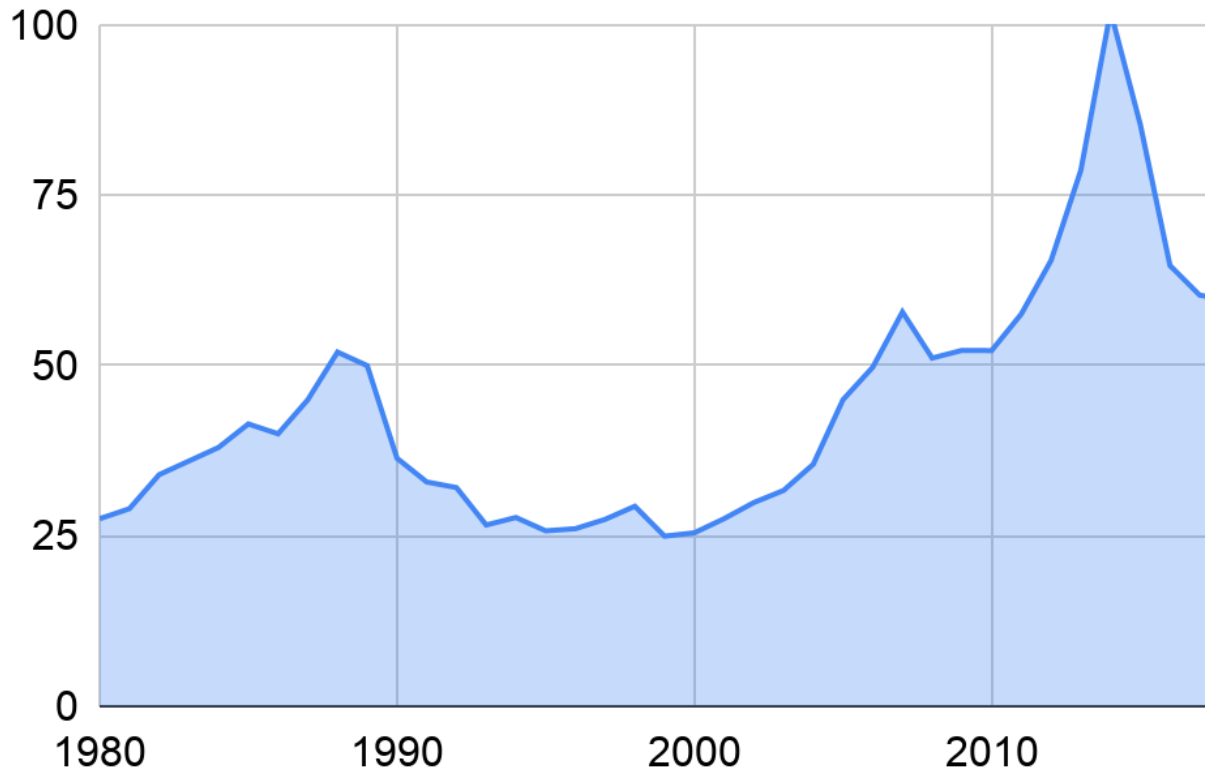
So do these wins suggest that anti-fur activists will soon end the archaic fur industry? Have their hard-hitting tactics — from [storming catwalks](#) to tossing a [dead raccoon](#) onto Anna Wintour's plate — worked? And could their success provide a model for other animal issues?

The Anti-Fur Rollercoaster

“Fur Industry Shrinking With No End in Sight,” the New York Times [headline](#) proclaimed, in 1991. Since then, the number of mink — the animal most commonly farmed for their fur — slaughtered each year has more than tripled, to more than 100M mink in 2015.

(Rabbits and ducks are farmed in far greater numbers than mink, 970M and 3B respectively each year, but mostly for their meat. Some portion of these rabbits, though, are farmed exclusively for their fur, while a [highly disputed](#) portion of down comes from [live plucked](#) ducks and geese. Perhaps another 12M raccoon dogs and 20M foxes are farmed for fur annually, while about 5M wild animals are trapped for their fur.)

Million Mink Farmed Globally



Farming of mink fell from a late 80's peak and then rose steeply from 2000 onward, driven by a surge in production and demand in China. Note: mink production data are unreliable, and multiple sources of data were

combined to offer the most accuracy. Sources: 1980-2004 data from Henning Otte Hansen, University of Copenhagen, used in [National Geographic](#); from 2005-08, [Intl Fur Animal Scientific Association](#); from 2009-18, compilation of data from ActAsia, [Russian Ministry of Agriculture](#), [Statistics Denmark](#), [Henning Otte Hansen](#), [US Dept of Agriculture](#), [US Fur Commission](#), and [Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada](#).

Why? A common activist explanation is that we moved on from fur too soon. In the 1980s and 90s, the largest animal rights groups prioritized fur campaigns. But as activists like Henry Spira [directed](#) the movement toward the much larger number of animals raised for meat, the fur campaigns receded. Under this story, fur is a lesson in the importance of sticking with the fight.

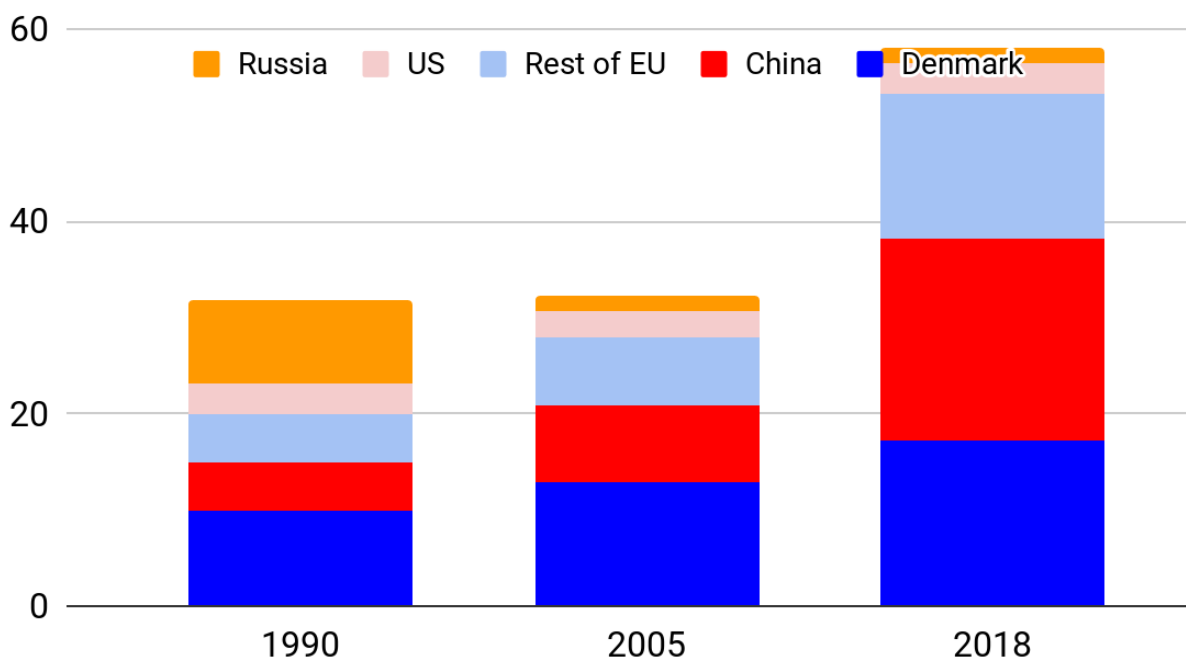
Meanwhile, the industry credits its forceful pushback against anti-fur forces. The fur industry [funded young designers](#) to use fur, boosting its presence in London, Milan, New York, and Paris fashion weeks, where [73%](#) of designers included fur in their fall 2015 collections. It pushed fur trim, as in Canada Goose jackets, and capitalized on the naturalistic fallacy to [frame fur](#) as a [greener option](#) than artificial faux fur.

But the data doesn't fully support either story. Mink farming numbers rose rapidly through the 1980s, even as [protests mounted](#), and fell mostly over just a few years, 1989-93, not associated with any special uptick in fur protests. They then rose rapidly through the 2000s, even as fur [protests intensified](#).

Economic trends offer a more plausible explanation. Fur's fall in 1989-93 coincided with both the fall of the Soviet Union, fur's biggest producer, and a global financial crisis, which hurt demand. Fur's resurgence since 2000 coincided with China's admission to the World Trade Organization, which allowed China to quickly become the world's [largest exporter](#) of fur, and fueled the prosperity that helped it later become the world's [biggest consumer](#) of fur too. Fur's recent decline coincided with an economic downturn in Russia and Chinese President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign, which have [hurt](#) demand in fur's two biggest markets.

But activist wins are likely playing an increasing role in suppressing demand. The fur industry seems especially [concerned](#) about the defection of top designers like Donatella Versace, who set the trends for the global fashion industry. Recent retail wins, like online retailer giant [Yoox Net-a-Porter](#), affect even China, where Yoox has a partnership with Alibaba. Chinese industry reports [described](#) "a deep sense of gloom" at this year's Beijing fur trade show.

Million Mink Farmed Annually in Biggest Producers



Denmark has always been one of the largest mink farming nations. Since 1990, China's production has surged while Russia's has fallen. Note: 1990 figures are only reliable for Denmark, US, and Russia. China 1990 figures are from 1988. Sources: Act Asia, [Fur Europe](#), [Domestication](#) by Clive Roots (p. 128), [Intl Fur Animal Scientific Association](#) (Figure 1), [Russian Ministry of Agriculture](#), [Statistics Denmark](#), [Wildlife Resources](#) by Harald Roth.

Lessons Learned

So what can farm animal advocates learn from the successes and failures of fur activism to date?

- **Focus on corporates, not individuals.** Three decades of anti-fur activism have barely budged US public opinion, which still [mostly views](#) fur as morally acceptable. But a decade of more targeted campaigns, coordinated by the Fur-Free Alliance, has secured pledges from [1,017](#) retailers and designers to go fur-free. As with caged eggs, advocates do best when they focus on the few hundred retailers that sell most animal products, not the few billion consumers who buy them.
- **Ban sales, not production.** European fur production bans have done little to suppress supply (see graph above) or demand. But after the EU banned the sale of seal fur in 2009, the number of Canadian seals killed annually [fell threefold](#), to fewer than 100K. Since the WTO [upheld](#) that sales ban, the EU could likely legally ban the sale of other cruelly produced goods. Advocates should push it to do so, starting with eggs, meats, and furs that don't meet the EU's existing animal welfare standards.
- **Present good alternatives.** Giorgio Armani, Anna Sui, and Michael Kors all cited innovation in faux fur as a reason to drop fur, just as Dunkin' [cited](#) plant-based meat innovation in adding Beyond Meat's sausage to its menu. Alternatives seem like an especially promising approach in

China, which accounts for about [57%](#) of global fur sales and [40%](#) of all farm animals confined globally. A new group, the Material Innovation Initiative, wants to promote technological alternatives to fur and other animal-based fabrics, as GFI and PBFA are doing for alternatives to meat, eggs, dairy, and fish.

Thanks for reading. Our new farm animal welfare researcher, Persis Eskander, contributed research for this newsletter. I'm looking forward to sharing more of her insights with you in future newsletters.