

The Political Animal: Wayne Pacelle: Kangaroos Aren't Shoes

The horror of the Australian fires should spark a movement to help shoe companies rid their supply chains of kangaroo skins

WASHINGTON, DC, USA, January 11, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- By Wayne Pacelle

The wildfires sweeping the grasslands and climbing the trees in Australia are not just hurting "the continent." They are charring the plants and burning up the animals. It's a frightening and apocalyptic scene, vividly dramatizing that forest fires that are typically regenerative to ecosystems have in this case morphed into a life-denying, runaway infernos.



Kangaroo amidst the ongoing Australian wildfires

A University of Sydney scientist says a billion animals have died – mammals, birds, and reptiles. Flames easily outpace pokey koalas, but even fleet-footed kangaroos cannot outrun them. These two animal emblems of the continent are themselves on fire. But it's the continent's entire cast of unusual animals who are at risk – the dingoes, emus, platypuses, wombats, possums, long-footed potoroos, silver-headed antechinus, regent honeyeaters and sugar gliders. Where's Noah when we need him?

This is animal misery and death on the scale of factory farming and industrial slaughter plants. After seeing this, if you don't think climate change is an animal protection issue, wake up and smell the embers.

Naturally some of the surviving marsupials have become the faces of the fire – the singed koala drinking from a water bottle; joeys peering out from burlap sacks hanging from walls rather than their mothers' pouches. These are the worst of times for Australia's animals.

But their pre-fire circumstance hasn't been a joy ride either. Australia's kangaroos have been subject to the largest commercial killing of land-based wildlife in the world. This mass slaughter occurs annually under the approving eye of the Australian government, which sets kill quotas in the millions. It's more a question of "license" than "limits" when it comes to the killing of wildlife.

Most hunting occurs in the dead of night, using a spotlight to freeze the animals and facilitate the killing. The government's guide National Code of Practice for Commercial Killing helpfully instructs hunters to shoot kangaroos in the head (as opposed to multiple body shots as the group flees and the hunters continue shooting in the dark, which is the reality) and then to check the pouches for any young. If a joey is found, the code calls for death by decapitation or blunt force to the head (clubbing or swinging the young animal by her legs into a rock).

The tropes put forward by the Australian Government – hunters receive training, the hunt is humane, kangaroo overpopulation necessitates “culls” or “harvests” – are beautifully deconstructed in “Kangaroo A Love-Hate Story,” the searing documentary by Mick McIntyre and Kate McIntyre Clere. If enough people see it, this documentary will do for kangaroos what Blackfish did for orcas.

Since a small percentage of Australians “infrequently” eat kangaroo (it’s notorious for harboring E coli and it’s even been banned in Russia), most kangaroo meat goes straight into pet food.

It’s a bit of a header to realize that one of the biggest drivers of kangaroo killing, in terms of the commercial incentives, is the sport of soccer. Specifically, soccer shoes. Nike, adidas and other sporting footwear manufacturers still use kangaroo skin in high-end soccer cleats.

You can diagram a curving kick straight from the Australian Outback to the Nike superstores, Dick’s Sporting Goods outlets, and soccer-specialty websites that hawk the shoes.

Adidas, the world’s largest purchaser of kangaroo skin, has been a particularly staunch defender of the kangaroo trade. Despite a 1971 ban on the commercial sale of kangaroo products in California, adidas continued to sell kangaroo cleats in the state until, in 2005, it was sued by the animal advocacy group Viva! USA, alleging unfair business practices for violating the ban. The case went to the California State Supreme court where Viva! prevailed.

Sore losers, adidas turned to the California legislature and succeeded in passing a bill that put a hold on the kangaroo ban. While that and another extension finally sunset in 2016, we are finding that kangaroo-leather soccer cleats are readily available in California (though some e-tailers like Zappos and Amazon are doing their best to adhere to the law by not shipping kangaroo cleats to California addresses; eBay not so much). Most of the big chains and independent stores in the state continue to sell K-leather, as it’s known. We hope to start making the case for better enforcement, and even bring the ban to more states.

So far, the Center for a Humane Economy, one of our sister organizations, has documented 63 models of kangaroo cleats, from a dozen manufacturers including adidas Asics, Lotto, Mizumo, Nike, Puma, and Umbro.

At a time when the world is grieving for kangaroos, we struggle to think how we might help from thousands of miles away. But help is right down the street when we refuse to buy shoes (or any product) made from kangaroos. And just as importantly, we must tell Nike and adidas it’s time to retire kangaroo leather from their soccer shoe lineup.

I’m sure the staff and leadership of these shoe companies have the same reaction of horror at the crisis in Australia as we do. But unlike us, they can make an executive decision tomorrow that will save millions of kangaroos in the years ahead.

Just do it.

Stop buying kangaroo leather.

We urge them to be like Diadora – the Italian athletic shoe manufacturer with at least five kangaroo leather models – which recently announced it would go kangaroo-free by the end of this year.

If you can sell soccer cleats without kangaroo skin in California, you can do it everywhere else. The athletic shoe industry has moved dramatically away from leather in the last few years, favoring lighter, durable synthetics and even plant-based materials. Adidas is even using ocean plastic to make shoes, helping mitigate another terrible human contribution to the killing of animals.

Both Nike and adidas have embraced the mantra of sustainability. But it must have applicability across its supply chain. They can breathe real meaning into it by standing up for kangaroos, rather than having customers standing on kangaroos.

What an announcement it would be for them, as the fires rage, to say no to K-leather. It would substitute hope for helplessness. It would put hop in our step when the world badly needs it.

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