

Mink Farms Incubate Cruelty and COVID-19

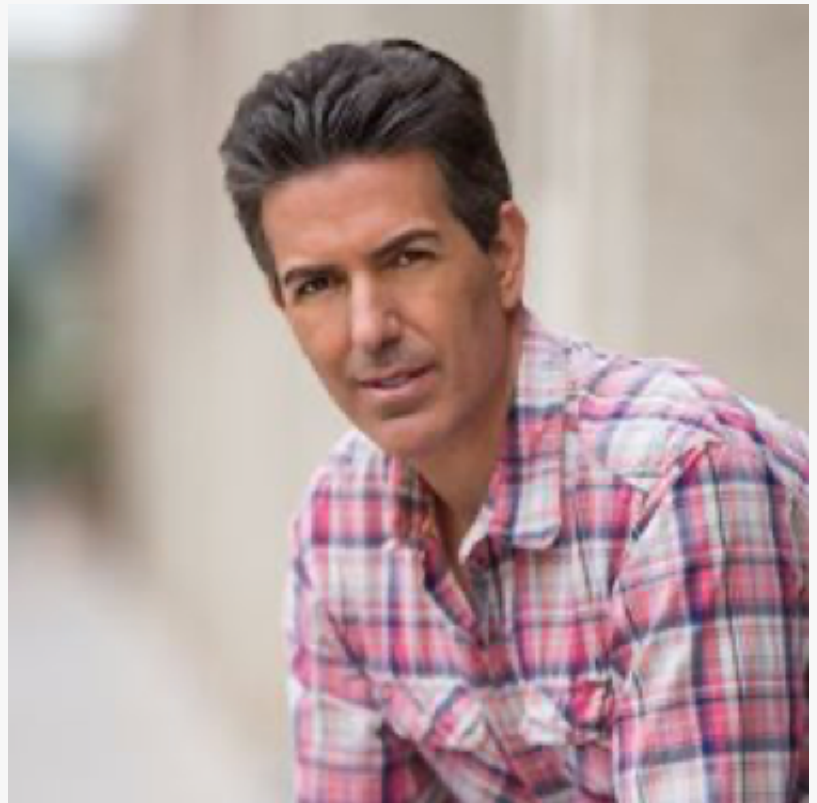
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by Wayne Pacelle

The globally unmanageable hopscotching of COVID-19 between living beings is today putting a spotlight on one of the most obscure, ruthless, and frivolous of animal use industries: the production of wild animals on fur farms, particularly mink raised for their pelts.

Seemingly more susceptible to getting COVID-19 than dogs or cats or most other mammals, American mink kept in extreme confinement and bred to be killed for fashion not only can contract the virus, but, according to one report in Europe, can spread it to farmers and their employees raising mink for their pelts.

The disease ricocheted through mink farms first in Denmark, Spain, the Netherlands, and other northern European nations, and it's now found its way to at least two mink farms in Utah. In Europe, farmers "depopulated" more than a million mink to arrest the spread of the virus. Dozens of farms have shut down in recent years in Utah, and 38 fur farms remain there. Workers at the two farms with infected mink have also tested positive for COVID-19.

Add the fur farm industry to live-wildlife markets, factory farms, cockfights, and deer game farms as animal-exploitation industries that can spawn or spread zoonotic diseases capable of taking



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human life and possibly upending human civilization in the years ahead.

America: Exporting Animal Cruelty

In so many ways, America has become the world's factory-farming producer, sending an enormous percentage of its pigs, chickens, and cattle raised and slaughtered to China and other nations, leaving rural communities to deal with the animal waste, soil erosion, antibiotic-resistant bacteria, and cruelty right here at home. The U.S. is also sending countless fighting birds to other nations in the world, from Mexico and Honduras to the Philippines and Vietnam. And tens of thousands of our horses are live-exported to Canada and Mexico and end up on the butcher's block there before being exported to Japan, Italy, France, and other nations.



Mink | Photo Credit: Shutterstock

Make no mistake, Americans are big consumers of factory-farmed meat, kangaroo skins for shoes, and all sorts of other animal products. But we also raise and kill massive numbers of animals export the products all over the world. And that's the case with the U.S. mink industry.

While major retailers from Armani to Macy's to Michael Kors have announced policies to stop selling fur, it is still in fashion among some small set consumers, mainly in China. We've learned, as with the trade in dog meat, ivory, live wildlife for consumption, ejiao from donkeys stolen and slaughtered by the millions, or bears for their bile, it takes only takes a small percentage of consumers in a nation of 1.4 billion people to drive mass killing of animals inside and outside of China to meet the demand.

Annually, mink farmers raise and kill three million animals a year, and ship out the pelts, mainly to China.

Kept in small cages, bred for various color phases of their fur, and "pelted," mink are treated as bad or worse than any animal on a factory farm. In confinement, these semi-aquatic wild carnivores resort to self-mutilation and cannibalism, even among their own family members. After a brief, miserable life, they face death by manual neck-breaking, electrocution, or gas poisoning. Wisconsin is America's top mink-producing state, with Utah second, with other states in the Upper Midwest and the Northwest accounting for the bulk of mink production.

I worked on this issue many years ago after I learned that USDA was spending millions of dollars of taxpayer dollars a year to promote foreign sales of U.S.-produced mink pelts through a

program known as the Market Promotion Program (later, the Market Access Program). Even with the agricultural lobby backing the program, it was tough for lawmakers to vote in favor of this kind of subsidy. You can imagine the ads – taking the hard-earned taxpayer dollars of Americans to prop up a luxury industry. With that political threat planted in their minds, a majority of lawmakers in the House voted to kill the subsidy. The Senate followed suit in a rout.

One animal advocate I know, whose grandfather was in the mink business in the Northwest, told me that when it was pelting season, his job as a boy was to gather up the dead mink after his grandfather's workers locked them in a chamber with deadly sodium cyanide powder sprinkled inside. After the thrashing was done and there was only silence, he'd open up the door and pull out the dead mink. He told me that he'd often have to pry the frozen jaws of the dead animals from the wire caging. They had been so desperate to escape from the toxic chamber that they'd try to bite through thick metal wire. None of them ever made it, he recounted.

Anti-fur movement must focus on shuttering American and European mink farms

Austria, the Czech Republic, and more than a half dozen other European nations ban fur farming, based on humane treatment concerns. Fur producers keep animals with wild dispositions in barren wire cages so small they can only bob and weave manically to stay active before they kill them. Despite a significant industry, the Netherlands is phasing out mink farming by 2024. But in the United States, it is not only legal, but almost entirely unregulated from an animal welfare perspective. Typically the only regulations address waste management, because fur farms create vast amounts of feces and wastewater that invariably leak into surrounding ground and surface waters.

COVID-19 may be the trigger to curtail live wildlife markets from China to the United States. It has weakened Spain's bullfighting industry, perhaps leaving that spectator sport vulnerable to legal proscriptions. It should also be a trigger for our renewed focus on factory fur farms. In a world where we have plenty of other clothing operations – with the manufacturers of those other products also gaining income from their enterprises and having their own claims to job creation and economic activity – it's time for us to use both political and economic levers to end this awful exploitation of mink.

Now that the mink industry is in the light, it's time for action.

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