

The tanning of leather for Swedish shoes

The production of leather - tanning of hides - is considered one of the most polluting industries. It is characterized by high consumption of chemicals and water and it generates emissions to air, water and soil. The industry also involves high risks regarding health and safety for workers. There is, for instance, a higher frequency of asthma, skin disorders and different forms of cancer among workers at tanneries.

The Swedish consumption of shoes has grown during the past decade and Swedish companies currently import around 9 000 tons of leather shoes each year. A large share of the shoes and the leather is produced in developing and transitional countries such as China, Vietnam and Pakistan.

The Swedish Nature Conservation Society and Swedwatch have investigated the largest shoe companies in Sweden regarding their work towards the leather industry, and the environmental effects from tanneries. The investigated companies in the report are; ANWR, Ecco, Eurosko, Nilson Group, Scorett and Vagabond. Two of these companies chose not to participate in formal interviews: ANWR and Vagabond.

The environmental load from the leather industry in regions with many tanneries was investigated in two field studies. In Pakistan a tannery, a subcontractor of Nilson Group, was visited. Nilson Group was the only company in the study that gave information about, and permissions to visit, their tanneries. The other field study was performed in Tamil Nadu in India, a region where leather to the products sold in Swedish shoe companies is being tanned.

Main findings:

- The majority of the investigated companies didn't know where the leather used in their shoes is tanned. The production chains in the shoe industry are long and complicated and the companies are often only in contact with the final supplier, i.e. the factory where the shoes are put together, excluding Ecco that have its own factories.
- The environmentally related requirements set up by the companies are being communicated to the final supplier, which in turn is supposed to pass down these requirements to subcontractors and raw material suppliers. None of the companies, except Ecco that have their own factories and tanneries, control if the requirements is being followed by their subcontractors.
- The environmentally related requirements of all the companies consist of a demand that the suppliers must follow national law in the country where the production is taking place. Apart from that all the companies have a list of chemical restrictions regarding the chemical content in the products. Only Vagabond and Ecco have an additional list with substances that are prohibited also in the production. Ecco also have requirements on energy effectiveness, recycling and reduction of emissions and resource use.
- The field study of the tannery used by Nilson Group in Pakistan clearly showed the effects of shoe companies not being in contact with the tanneries. The factory lacked an effluent treatment plant as well as protective equipment for the workers. There were also uncertainties regarding the factories permission to tan leather. The factory management stated that they did not know of any environmental requirements from the Swedish buyers nor had they heard of any code of conduct. They also stated that the conditions in the

production had never been controlled by Nilson Group. Water samples downstream the tannery as well as soil samples showed pollution caused by the lack of water purification.

- The field study in India covered a larger area with a multiple of tanneries. Some of these stated that they had Swedish customers even though no companies were named. Water samples from the river that runs through the area showed major pollution, including increased salinity in both watercourses and soil. The consequences of the pollution have been a radical reduction of the harvests in the surrounding agricultural areas, something that Swedwatch verified both through interviews with farmers and agricultural statistics from local authorities.

Currently there are few environmentally friendly alternatives in the Swedish market. Most of the interviewed company representatives state that they have not noticed any interest or demand from the consumers, apart from Scorett who declare that they often receive questions from clients about environment and ethics in the production. The shoe market has not experienced an investigation similar to the one of the textile and clothes industry in the past few years. Possibly, more attention given to the negative environmental effects of the leather industry might create an interest in the subject, which in turn might prompt the companies to start working more actively with this issue.