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After Schiaparelli's controversial, hyper-realistic animal heads in Paris, designers at New York Fashion Week featured the animal kingdom in their own ways — raising fresh questions about the often extractive and transactional relationship between fashion and nature.

Private Policy, Eckhaus Latta and more joined Collina Strada and Dion Lee in featuring materials derived from or that imitate animals — from snakeskin to

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Can fashion find a way to celebrate nature on the runway — and off?

Brands in New York, from Collina Strada to Dion Lee, are drawing inspiration from nature. Following the Schiaparelli heads, the trend is raising questions about the industry's conservation efforts.

BY RACHEL CERNANSKY

February 16, 2023

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mohair, in addition to traditional leather — in their collections, animal likenesses on the runway or homages to the animal kingdom in their show notes.

Animal-inspired themes and animal materials, from wool and leather to fur and exotic skins, have a long history in fashion. However, with the climate and biodiversity crises growing more urgent and fashion facing more pressure to reckon with its role in [exacerbating them](#), the discrepancy between fashion's external messaging and internal operations may be larger and more consequential than ever.

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Why is sustainability still absent from fashion month?

Calls for change came in 2020, but fashion shows were back in full force this season — with sustainability agendas, awareness and education largely left off the runway. Advocates say more must be done to challenge the system.
BY RACHEL CERNANSKY



Critics say that while most designers draw inspiration from nature, they fail to make a reciprocal effort to conserve it or even reduce the negative impacts of their [supply chains on it](#), and it's time for that to change.

“We need nature, and our economy is embedded in it, but we're losing it at this incredible rate,” says Helen Crowley, partner at global investment and advisory firm Pollination and former head of sustainable sourcing and nature initiatives at Kering. “It's time to step up and say, ‘I love nature. I use it in my business, I get value out of it, let me give value back to it.’ That's not saying I want to put a price on nature. In fact, if brands stepped up with that responsibility, it would enable everyone else to enjoy nature too.”

“Even something someone might think trivial, like a leopard print — if we do find that beautiful, and the fashion industry is actively destroying that beauty, why wouldn't we talk about that and figure out how to stop it?” says Julie Stein, former executive director of the Wildlife Friendly Enterprise Network. “Artists have drawn inspiration from the natural world from square one, but for me, there needs to be some respect when you do that for where the inspiration's coming from.”



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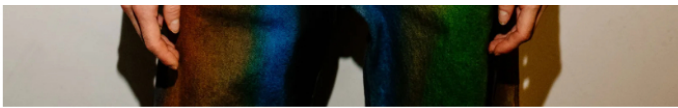
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Eckhaus Latta, AW23. Photo: Hunter Abrams

By taking inspiration from nature without giving back to it or even acknowledging the context from which that inspiration came, fashion is perpetuating not only the long-running sense of scepticism from advocates and scientists about the industry's commitment to its own environmental targets but also the disconnect that people, in fashion circles and in society more broadly, feel from the natural world.

Researchers reported in 2021, for instance, that fashion's widespread use of leopard print "may mask the genuine threat faced by the species in the wild" and that despite millions of social media posts and news articles talking about leopard print, only a fraction (less than 2 per cent in the news media) mentioned the leopard's conservation status — the reality of which is that they have disappeared from more than 75 per cent of their historic range and are extinct in at least a dozen countries and regions.

Considering the pressure on fashion to reduce its impacts — and considering the industry's own promises on biodiversity conservation specifically, including staging a larger presence at the most recent UN biodiversity conference than it's ever had before — wildlife advocates and biodiversity conservationists say fashion has to recognise that it can't go on taking inspiration from nature and exploiting it at the same time. The industry has borrowed heavily from the natural world for so long and is overdue, experts say, to start returning the favour.

"While freedom for creative expression is obviously really important, to me, it shows some nearsightedness — dare I say tone deafness? — to use wildlife imagery in the middle of a raging biodiversity crisis without acknowledging that symbolism," says Stein. "If companies use wildlife imagery in their marketing or designs, it is a wonderful opportunity to take that a step further and do something substantive for wildlife in the real world — as a sort of offset against some of the damage done by the industry, which contributes to some of the primary threats to wildlife's long-term survival."

That's the idea behind a UN initiative, the Lion's Share Fund, proposed years ago that would have called on companies using wildlife or wilderness images in their marketing materials to direct some revenue to conservation of the objects in those images. "Unlike people who appear in advertising campaigns, animals and their habitat receive no remuneration from advertisers," the fund's website explains.

"We want brands to embrace that responsibility and say, 'I want to do things differently', and this is one piece of doing things differently — the advertising and the way I use nature and give back. The other piece is also in your business operations. You can't not do that as well," says Crowley.

In an informal way and at a smaller scale, that's an approach that Collina Strada designer Hillary Taymour has tried to take. Her show, titled "Please Don't Eat My Friends", referenced sustainability in its show notes and pointed out that recycled, deadstock and biodegradable materials were used to make the collection. "There's definitely ways to give back, ways to invest in the right places," she says, pointing to their show last season, held at a monarch butterfly waystation in Brooklyn. "All the money from the show to rent that space went back to the scientists and to help keep the park preserved, and then our theme was around butterflies."



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"If I'm doing the right thing, let's make it a trend," says Collina Strada's Taymour. Photo: Collina Strada, Etienne Tordoir; Collina Strada, Hunter Abrams

It's clear that animals are on-trend this season, she says, acknowledging the irony behind many of the examples that have emerged so far. "We're seeing snakeskins, we're seeing horns, ears, we're seeing all these things — dead, alive. And so much fur this season — fake fur, which seems weird because we all know how horrible fake fur is," she says. "Nature is the ultimate inspiration — but we can never do it better because nature is so amazing."

With his "second skin" collection, Dion Lee placed snakeskin — and the idea that a snake sheds its skin and is "constantly shedding and evolving" — at the centre of his show, with the most literal interpretation being a snakeskin leather dress that looped, in one long piece as if it were a coiled snake, around the model's body. Models in Private Policy's show, "We Are All Animals", had their nails cut like claws, some wearing animal ears, antlers and horns. "We thought about how we are inspired by animals, how we can be free like them, live one day at a time like them and be in harmony with the rest of nature like them," Siying Qu, one of the designers behind the label, along with Haoran Li, [told Hypebeast](#).

No show has attracted the level of attention or scrutiny that Schiaparelli generated with its faux animal heads in Paris weeks earlier, but for Stein, they all represent missed opportunities, the Schiaparelli show most of all. (Schiaparelli declined to be interviewed for this story.)



Schiaparelli's couture collection. Photo: Estrop/Getty Images

"It seemed like a way to get attention — which they did get, but once they got attention, it was a missed opportunity to provide more information or talk about how people could help or what the issues even are," she says, adding that even the messaging that the brand did put out was mixed. "At one point, they said it was an allegory, then they said the wildlife was protecting the models, then they said it was celebrating nature. I think in the end, there wasn't really a message — and they hadn't educated themselves or done their homework properly on what the subject was."

Fashion has a responsibility, she says, to not only improve its operations — including by working with and supporting suppliers in transitioning to better production and manufacturing practices — but also to embrace its power of storytelling and potential for communicating and strengthening cultural values.

What that should look like may be hard to imagine, in part because brands are such a long way from doing that. That doesn't mean it's impossible, however — and there is some very low-hanging fruit, she says, that would offer easy places to start. She's spoken with sustainability executives at brands who haven't known the difference between wildlife and livestock, for example, which she says illustrates the clear need for internal education about the link between fashion and the natural world. She's

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for internal education about the link between fashion and the natural world. She's worked with countless brands and designers who have never visited a farm or educated themselves on what the issues are.

"They didn't know what wildlife was around the farm or what wildlife used to be around the farm and is no longer there. That's a gap in knowledge, and it's invisible," she says. "One great thing that the fashion industry could do is make that more visible. That could be an artistic project — camera traps to show mountain lions moving through these properties where they source from. When the farmers are working hard to coexist with them, it's an incredible story. Most people will never know or see it. But once the mountain lions are gone, the story's also gone."

What's exciting, though, is that fashion is in a unique position to model a new way forward, Stein says. "I love fashion, and I would love to buy from a brand that I knew was caring about these issues."

With animals trending this season, the industry has an opening to figure out how to demonstrate and act on that concern. "I didn't want to do the show without making a statement," says Taymour. "If I'm doing the right thing, let's make it a trend."

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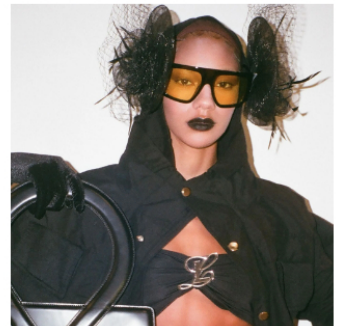
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