



The Real Fashion Victims

An undercover investigation into the secret world of the rabbit fur trade in Portugal



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Introduction

The first short but revealing glimpse to Portugal's fur trade

In March 2005, **ANIMAL** went inside a chinchilla fur farm in Peso da Régua, in the North of Portugal, which, according to its owner, produced 500,000 chinchilla pelts per year. As a result of that operation, this farm was publicly exposed and closed down by the authorities (Ministry of Agriculture and General Direction of Veterinary), at the time. Although farming and slaughtering fur bearing animals for their fur is permitted by the Portuguese legislation (which actually has some regulations applying to it), this chinchilla farm was not licensed, despite being relatively known in the town where it was based. At the time, **ANIMAL** was told that this same fur producer had other similar farms nearby, but we were never able to determine where.

This episode made it clear that, despite information provided by the Portuguese authorities (Ministry of Agriculture and General Direction of Veterinary) at that time, saying that there were no licensed fur farms in Portugal, Portugal actually had fur farms – that were operating on a completely free, unsupervised and secretive way.

Fur in Portugal: Law and (Dis)Order

Recently, on 12th October 2006, the same authorities (Ministry of Agriculture and General Direction of Veterinary), have responded to an enquiry from a Member of Parliament, Mr. Luís Carloto Marques, about several aspects related to animal protection in Portugal, in which they have again stated that:

“The General Direction of Veterinary does not know of any breeding and/or slaughter facilities of animals for the extraction and use of their fur, and there are no legal regulations for such facilities.”

It was, therefore, stated that, to the knowledge of these authorities, there are no fur farms operating in Portugal (no information was provided about what has happened to the chinchilla fur farm exposed and closed down in early April 2005).

Furthermore, these authorities stated that “there are no legal regulations for such facilities”, which is not true: 1) the law-decree n.º 64/2000, of 22nd April, establishes the rules governing the protection of animals in farms where they are being reared, being applicable to animals being farmed and reared for many purposes – including meat, obviously –, but also including for their skin and fur; and 2) the law-decree n.º 28/96, of 2nd April, establishes the rules governing the protection of animals at the time of slaughter, stating that it is applicable to animals being slaughtered for their meat, for their skin and/or for their fur – it specifically regulates how rabbits, and also chinchillas, minks and foxes, should be killed (“for the use of their fur”, states this law-decree).

This made it clear that not only the relevant Portuguese authorities are leaving the existing fur farms completely out of control and have no official records of any (including the chinchilla fur farm that has been closed down by these same authorities but that might be operating again), but, shockingly, these same authorities are also unaware of the existing legislation which is meant to regulate fur farms and the slaughter of fur bearing animals for their fur, which is both strange and seriously disturbing.

ANIMAL strongly opposes capturing and/or breeding animals and killing them for their fur, so **ANIMAL** felt it was important to assess what is the current and real situation of the fur trade in Portugal and the control that the Government has over it (apparently, it does not), namely to become more prepared with the relevant domestic facts to call the Portuguese Parliament to completely ban fur farming in Portugal – and to capture animals to be killed for their fur.

As a result of the combination of all these factors, **ANIMAL** decided to conduct a special investigation into the reality of the fur trade and production circles in Portugal, with the certainty that there was a considerably strong circle of fur trade in Portugal, supported by an existing domestic fur production scheme within the country, despite what it was obvious – many of the fur that is sold and bought in Portugal is imported, as in so many other countries.

This is the truth of the global fur trade going on in the world, which knows no territory barriers, and in which China, European and South American countries play a tremendously important role. Recent investigations carried by Swiss Animal Protection and East Asia – and, later, by Care for the Wild – have solidly revealed and documented that. Little did we know that Portugal's fur trade is also part of this global fur trade, sharing much of its international links, especially in rabbit fur. This report documents the findings of this investigation.

The Investigation and Its Key Findings

How this investigation started

This report summarises the findings of an undercover investigation done by **ANIMAL** in late October in Portugal, focusing on the global reality of the country's fur trade, with a special interest on the existing domestic fur production cycles.

Following initial investigations, it immediately became clear that the vast majority of Portugal's fur trade is centred around rabbit fur – often linked directly to the breeding of rabbits for meat, although not always, as this report shows. This led the investigation work to focus essentially on the rabbit fur trade, due to its weight in the trade, although with a permanent search for other fur production that investigators could come across with.

The investigators soon also concluded that, aside from the rabbit fur production, there is other fur production (chinchilla, fox, mink, etc.) in the country but only in small to medium scale systems, and those involved in it are highly secretive about what they do.

The following information is drawn from the observations and interviews that **ANIMAL's** investigators conducted during this investigation. It is not an exhaustive report into rabbit fur farming in Portugal, it is not a technical or scientific report, and much of the information provided to investigators has not been rigorously verified externally, although it appears to be very solid, coming from the very agents involved in the trade who spoke about their activity believing the investigators approved it.

Rabbit fur: not a “simple” by-product

A very important part of rabbit farming in Portugal is linked both to the production of rabbit meat and fur, which makes it more profitable than to raise rabbits just for their meat, as the fur brings more profit to the business.

It is important to stress out that it is not just a by-product, as many people think – rabbit fur is very much used in fur clothing and normal clothing with some fur, as well as in fur trim, in Portugal as much as in so many other European countries (and in other regions of the world, surely), and the public demand is being very strong, especially with the recent strong return of fur to fashion, and especially with the rabbit fur being much cheaper and accessible to consumers than fox, chinchilla, mink or any other fur. It is, therefore, unsurprising that rabbit fur plays a very important role in the economy of the rabbit farming industry and is central to the global fur trade.

Also, many producers breed rabbits only for their fur – and not for their meat (although they may export their meat for countries where large rabbit meat can be sold, like Germany, as Portuguese consumers do not like it) – and sell their pelts for higher prices.

These rabbits have softer fur and are bred with more care for their fur than fur and meat rabbits, and are killed only when they reach 3 to 5 months of age. Consequently, the prices of rabbit fur vary according to the quality of the fur.

“Chinchilla” rabbits (Chinchilla Rex rabbits)

There are producers breeding “Chinchilla” rabbits, which, in truth, are Chinchilla Rex rabbits, a rabbit species with a very similar fur to Chinchillas. These rabbits’ pelts are many times sold as genuine chinchilla fur (as, according to what was told to investigators, only experts in fur are really able to distinguish the genuine chinchilla fur from the chinchilla rabbit fur) in the markets. These breeders make a lot more money from this fur, as chinchilla rex rabbits have, by far, many more babies per year than chinchillas do. However, it entails more work and consumes more time and resources than breeding “normal” rabbits – still, it can be very profitable.

Breeding rabbits: important numbers to know

ANIMAL’s investigators were informed of crucial facts to better understand the numbers of this industry advanced by producers: in general, each female rabbit bred for meat and for fur has about 10 babies every 45 days. Females usually breastfeed babies for 30 to 35 days at the farms (although this may vary, as investigators found) and have a 10-day-break until the next birth. Breeder female rabbits live up to 2 years before they are sent to slaughter. Each female breeder may have about 80 babies per year – about 160 babies in the 2 years they are allowed to live.

Chinchillas usually have only about 2 babies per year, which makes the breeding of these animals much more expensive than breeding rabbits. Chinchillas are usually killed only when they are about 12 months old, the investigators were told, unlike rabbits, which, in general, are killed when they are only 6 weeks old, if bred and killed both for their fur and meat, or when they are from 3 to 5 months old, if bred and killed purely for their fur. That is why chinchilla fur, which is considered softer and more attractive than rabbit fur, is so expensive to the public (unlike “normal” rabbit fur).

One can only imagine the profit that chinchilla rabbit producers make from breeding rabbits through a cheap breeding system of animals that have dozens of babies per year, and selling these animals’ pelts often as genuine strictly chinchilla pelts for very high prices – which, if these were genuine chinchilla pelts, would have to be extracted from animals that would have to be kept alive longer than rabbits and that would only have very few babies per year. Clearly, this is a big business.

Rabbit farmers get around 2 euros per kilo for rabbit meat – currently considered a very good price. The price they receive for the fur seems to vary (it depends on the farms breeding the animals, the quality of their fur and the rabbit species). Artificial insemination is common and is followed by hormone injection to make females ovulate. Some farmers also keep the rabbits away from the babies for 2 days (48 hours) because, if they don’t breastfeed, they are more likely to fall pregnant. Investigators were told that water quality is very important to avoid high mortality rates – but proper feeding was never mentioned. Meat and fur rabbits have a mortality rate of up to 25% when put on fattening – **ANIMAL**’s investigators observed and filmed many dead rabbits in different farms, but especially in one that features on the “Real Fashion Victims” video.

Inside The Fur Farms

The first farm visited by ANIMAL's investigators was a large rabbit farm, breeding rabbits for fur and meat, in Pinhoa, Casal Mulato, in Lourinhã (Lisbon district).

This is the large rabbit farm featured in the film during the "loading" sequence. The farm holds a total of 28,000 rabbits (2,000 breeder females and 26,000 for fattening).

They sell about 2,000 rabbits per week to the slaughterhouse. Females are inseminated 12 days after they give birth. So they have babies every 42 days. They only use artificial insemination at this farm, where there are no males. This farm's producers said they preferred the white rabbits because their meat is better and they grow faster.

According to the owners, the fur produced here is exported to Spain, being dealt with by the slaughterhouse later visited by investigators (see below and covert footage section of the film). Rabbits weigh about 2kg when they are sent to slaughter, but only 1kg is turned into meat. This farm sends its rabbits to slaughter when they are about 70 days old – the rabbits here are breastfed until they are sent to slaughter. Females usually have 9 to 10 babies. Soon they are transferred to fattening cages, each cage has about 6 to 7 rabbits for fattening. The owner of this farm has been farming rabbits for 12 years and this present farm is about 10 years old. At this farm, ANIMAL's investigators were told that Portugal produces about 40% of its consumption of rabbits, and imports the rest from France and Spain. Treatment lagoons already exist for rabbit farms and all farm equipment comes from Italy.

Not too far from the first farm visited, investigators went inside a second, medium-size, farm breeding rabbits again both for their fur and meat, in Pinhoa, Casal Mulato, in Lourinhã (Lisbon district).

This farm features heavily in the film (particularly the feeding sequences with dead rabbits being pulled out of cages). This establishment holds a total of 240 female rabbits, has 120 cages for fattening, with 15 rabbits in each (total of 1,800 rabbits for fattening). Around 500 to 900 animals are sent to slaughter every week. Rabbits on fattening usually die from diarrhea, it was said to investigators. It is highly likely that the diarrhea is a result of improper feeding – hay is fundamental for an ideal diet for rabbits and it was hardly seen during the visits. Apparently, the feeding that the animals have is meant to generate faster growth and fattening, and not at all to favour their health (and, consequently, their welfare).

At this farm, investigators were told that females are kept in separated cages because they bite each other when they have their periods. However, female rabbits do not menstruate – they are induced ovulators, which means that they can breed whenever a male is around to impregnate them or are stimulated to do so. The best and more realistic explanation for these attacks is stress due to very poor welfare in captivity.

At this farm, females usually have from 7 to 11 babies. When a female has too many babies, they swap the babies to another female with fewer babies to breastfeed them, but fake mothers can eat adopted babies, investigators were told. Females have babies every 45 days. Babies are breastfed for about a month, here. This farm sends its rabbits to slaughter when they are about 75 days old, when they weigh about 2kg. Reproductive females are sent to slaughter when they are about 2 years old. Males are sent to slaughter when they are about 3 to 4 years old. Trucks from the slaughterhouse (Coelhoeste, in Bombarral, district of Leiria) come frequently to pick up the rabbits.

In the following day, the investigation team was able to film in a second small scale (domestic) rabbit supplier (see external shots of small huts featured in film), in the area of Turquel/Benedita, in Alcobaça, district of Leiria.

The investigators also met with a truck driver who was also a relevant agent in the rabbit fur business.

Investigators travelled north to Casalinho da Foz, road Pombal-Figueiras, in Mata Mourisca, Pombal, following information from another source. The team gained access to a large, modern rabbit farm (external shots of

round green farm seen in film) that produces rabbits for both fur and meat. They hold about 1,000 female breeders, and about 1,000 animals are sent to slaughter every two weeks.

Again, it was clear that, disguised as a “simple” rabbit meat production industry, there is a big net of rabbit meat *and fur* farms that strongly build a considerably important Portuguese fur industry.

In the afternoon, investigators visited Farmolap, a breeding/artificial insemination rabbit farm, located at Variante das Bichaneiras, Gafanha da Encarnação, in the Industrial Area of Mota, in Ílhavo.

The investigators talked to the owner of this farm, which holds 203 male breeders and 210 female breeders. Breeders are usually sent to slaughter when they are 2 years old. The best breed for meat suggested to clients is a black/brown male with a white female, the investigators learned.

The owner of this establishment told the investigators about a further slaughterhouse (see below) that was visited but where a visit was not authorised. She told the team that the slaughterhouse sells fur to China (via the processing company Exporpele) for 30 cents per pelt, which covers the total costs of slaughter.

ANIMAL’s investigation team met with the manager of Litoral Coelho, the rabbit slaughterhouse in the area of Cantanhede, but he responded negatively to a request for a tour there.

In the region of Covilhã and Guarda, investigators visited Aldeia da Ribeira, near Vilar Formoso, in Sabugal. The establishment here was Cunicultura Soito da Raia.

This farm does not appear in the film, but it is important for the purpose of this report to mention that the establishment has about 2,060 female breeders and sends about 5,500 rabbits to slaughter every 2 weeks – this was the largest number quoted to investigators during the entire project.

Investigators have also been to a specialist rabbit breeding farm in Carrascal, in the locality of Prazeres de Aljubarrota, in Alcobaça.

The farm has 32 males and 600 females (breeders). They also have rabbits for fattening and send them to Litoral Coelho (the rabbit slaughterhouse that responded negatively to the request by the investigators for a visit). The owners said the slaughterhouse gets about 40 to 50 cents per fur, which is enough to cover slaughter costs and thus provides an essential income. They inseminate about 5,000 females per week in other farms – they can inseminate up to 100 females per hour. Brown and black rabbits are sold to locals and taken to markets as wild rabbits. 20% of this farm’s whole production is sold like that. This establishment features in the film (the artificial insemination sequence).

ANIMAL’s investigation team filmed loading sequence at the first rabbit farm in Pinhoa, Lourinhã, mentioned above.

The investigators have also filmed the transport after the loading. All the sequence of events, as the film documents it, is very violent, with the animals being very roughly handled.

The investigators visited the rabbit slaughterhouse to where the rabbits were transported. This slaughterhouse is Coelhoeste – Sociedade Comercial de Abate de Coelhoos do Oeste, Lda., located in Vale da Bica, Pó, in Bombarral, district of Leiria.

This establishment accounts for the entire covertly filmed sequence of the film. The investigators were told that the slaughterhouse slaughters about 7,000 rabbits per day, three days a week. A total of rabbits per month corresponds to about 100,000 furs, a quantity that he salts and sells to a company called Exporpele. Exporpele sends them to Spain (Barcelona), where it is cheaper to export them to China. The fur

processed in China comes back to Europe/Portugal to be exported to different places or supply the Portuguese “cheap” market.

The slaughterhouse’s owner and manager said to the investigators that he is a pioneer and the only one doing the cheap fur trade in Portugal. He also said that he is trying to expand this business by buying fur from other slaughterhouses.

He stated that he aims to double the production by selling 100,000 rabbit pelts twice a month, instead of only once a month. Employees are told to be careful with the blood that can damage the fur. He also said he has a vet that deals with clients and receives complaints from clients when the fur is too dirty.

Investigators learned that the fur trade “on the side” reduces the costs of slaughter. The slaughter of one rabbit costs about 25 cents plus 6 cents per kilo of residues (blood and flesh that are buried in a big hole close by). Each fur is sold to Exporpele for 15 cents, so costs of slaughter are reduced to about 10 cents.

This slaughterhouse was owned by Exporpele before, but nowadays is not worth having a vertically integrated production, he declared – farming, slaughter, meat market and fur market have to be separated to gain efficiency and profitability. However, the slaughterhouse lets Exporpele use its space for drying fur of chinchilla rabbits.

Exporpele has chinchilla rabbits fur farming schemes. According to information obtained from other sources, including the Internet, Exporpele is said to be also running a chinchilla fur farming scheme in Portugal, “hiring” people to breed chinchillas in their homes, in domestic small to medium scale productions, in an agreement in which Exporpele provides the breeders and gives instructions on how to do the breeding work, buying the pelts to the people breeding the animals for the company.

According to the owner of the slaughterhouse, the international fur market is currently dominated by Argentina and Mexico. The main buyers are France, Austria, Belgium, Germany and the UK.

At the slaughterhouse, after the rabbits are killed and skinned, the furs are salted and put in containers to be sent abroad to processors. From these processing units they are sold to make coats. China is heavily involved in this business – the slaughterhouse manager said that China buys the whole rabbit fur production of Spain and Portugal.

ANIMAL’s investigators have also been to a rabbit farm apparently linked to Exporpele, which was close to the Coelhoeste slaughterhouse. The owner was a business partner of the owner of Exporpele.

This farm sends about 4,000 to 5,000 rabbits to slaughter per week. It has a total of 2,000 female breeders. Investigators asked about the chinchilla rabbits they had heard about from the slaughterhouse manager and were told that that production was up North, close to Porto. The team also asked if they had actual chinchillas (the rodents, not the rabbits) on the North and the response was positive, with a comment on the differences between rabbit and chinchilla breeding: “No, what you will see there is completely different. We don’t use artificial insemination for chinchillas. There is one male for four females and the male is free to walk through the females’ individual cages. The cages are not disposed horizontally as you see here, they are vertical, one on the top of the other”.

The investigators found their way to an Exporpele rabbit fur farm that has Rex-rabbits (Chinchila Rex, Castor Rex and White Rex). This farm is located in Moreira de Rei, Fafe, in the district of Braga.

The investigators looked into more information about rex-rabbits on the internet and found that this breed was created in 1919 in France by a breeding of rabbits that were born with “rat fur” – long, soft and thick hair.

The first rabbits were brown (Castor Rex). Later on, other breeds were made to create new colours, including the Chinchilla Rex (greys).

From the farmer and dealer, investigators learned that, while meat and fur rabbits are sent to slaughter when they are 6 weeks-old, Rex rabbits, namely Chinchilla Rex rabbits, have to be 4 to 5 months-old to “mature” the fur. The farmer has about 600 female breeders in the farm we went: 50% Chinchilla Rex, 40% Castor Rex and 10% White Rex. The most profitable fur is from chinchilla rex (about 15 euros each), then castor rex (between 10 to 15 euros), and then white rex (about 10 euros).

Investigators were told that rex-rabbits are more difficult to breed and the fur is more highly prized. They have also a mortality rate of about 25%. Also, they have to be kept in individual cages to guarantee the fur quality. A very important information provided by this dealer to the investigators was that rex rabbits are sent to slaughter in individual boxes and slaughter has to be manual and slow not to break or damage the fur.

Females rex rabbits have about 6 babies, so the total production is about 3,600 rabbits every time they have babies (the best season is winter: the colder, the best for fur). After a mortality rate of 25%, the total figure would be of 2,700 rabbits or 40,500 euros (however, that is nothing compared to 15,000 euros per month from a single slaughterhouse, which also makes it clear that the fur and meat rabbit production is very profitable and is the most widely practiced).

Investigators were also told that the international market of Rex rabbits involves their slaughter in Portugal, the export of their fur to a Spanish processor in Catalonia, and the import of the furs back to Portugal, where they are selected to be mainly sent to Italy, France, Germany and the UK, among other destinations. The meat may be exported to Germany and France because Portuguese consumers don't like big rabbits, said the producer.

Conclusion

This unprecedented **ANIMAL** investigation offers – for the first time – a rare glimpse into Portugal's role in the secretive international fur trade. It became clear that Portugal has an important rabbit fur production circle operating and that chinchilla fur is probably the second biggest fur production in Portugal (but still very far from the weight and size of the rabbit fur industry).

During this investigation, no fox, mink or other fur farms were detected and it became clear that, if they exist, these should be small to medium-size, highly secretive, farms.

This was a revealing study that is of extreme usefulness to expose the fur trade and its very well hidden backstage, and to support **ANIMAL**'s and other groups campaigns to end it through a strong and complete ban to all this trade.