



BUSINESS

Penney takes a different tack in dog-fur flap

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J.C. Penney Co. removed some fur-trimmed coats from its racks around Christmas after animal-rights activists objected that the fur came from wild dogs in China.

Last week, the department-store company put the coats back on the racks — but only after directing employees to use marker pens to blot out the line on the label that identified the trim as raccoon fur.

The fur-collared leather coats were sold under the house brands St. John's Bay and a.n.a., and by this week they were marked down at a Penney's in Dallas from the original \$349.99 to \$74.99. About two dozen remained.

"We sold a lot of them during Christmas," said a saleswoman at a Penney store in North Carolina who spoke on condition of anonymity because she feared losing her job. "I hope people who bought those coats aren't animal lovers. But I guess if they're wearing fur, they're not."

By putting the coats back on the racks, Penney is charting a different course than rival Macy's, which last month pulled Sean John jackets after they turned out to contain the same fur. Macy's said it has a policy against selling products with dog fur.

Animal-rights groups are using the incident to pressure Penney to drop sales of all real fur, including fox. A few clothiers such as Polo Ralph Lauren and J. Crew have stopped using fur, and designers Kenneth Cole and Calvin Klein have promised to follow suit.

But Penney, with more than 1,000 stores catering to middle-income shoppers, says it has no plans to alter its fashion selections.

"We do sell a few fur-trim items. We will continue to do so," said Darcie Brossart, a spokeswoman for the Plano-based company.

Penney also downplays any link between Lassie and the animal whose fur is used on some of its garments. That animal is often called a raccoon dog because of its full coat and dark patches around the eyes.

"Asiatic raccoon is the species name," Brossart said. "It's on the Federal Trade Commission's list of fur that

is legal to sell in the United States. It's not a dog."

Animal-rights advocates counter that although it looks like an oversized, fluffy raccoon and isn't kept as a pet, it is a canine breed — something Penney doesn't dispute while noting that foxes are canines, too.

"They are definitely a member of the dog family," said Kristin Leppert, manager of the anti-fur campaign at The Humane Society of the United States. "What's equally important is that they're getting killed by the millions in the most atrocious way."

Activists from Swiss Animal Protection posing as a documentary film crew say they went to China and photographed raccoon dogs and foxes being killed at large fur-harvesting operations.

The crew's disturbing video — posted on the Internet — shows animals clubbed or slammed on the ground. Some continue writhing, gasping and blinking as they are skinned alive.

Clothing made with raccoon dog fur has turned up at several retailers, according to Leppert of the Humane Society. She said she bought a St. John's Bay coat in Maryland and sent it for analysis at a German laboratory, which said the fur was raccoon dog instead of raccoon.

Penney sent samples to a lab near Dallas, which also confirmed the fur was raccoon dog, Brossart said. The coats were pulled off racks two days before Christmas.

Brossart said company lawyers determined it was legal to sell the coats as long as they didn't claim that the fur came from a particular species. A new order went to stores last week, and the word "raccoon" was blotted out from the labels.

"We always knew we were selling real fur," she said, "but we didn't want any customers to think they were wearing raccoon."