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Five Freedoms and the international fur trade

A critical analysis of conditions filmed on two certified “high welfare” Finnish fur farms, reviewed against the Five Freedoms of animal welfare.

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The Five Freedoms are a scientifically underpinned framework developed to promote the humane treatment of animals under human control. Established in the United Kingdom 40 years ago, they are now universally recognised and have been adopted and adapted across the world for animals kept in a wide range of circumstances. Indeed, the pre-eminent World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) has adopted them as its guiding principles on animal welfare, and they are now codified as welfare needs in UK and EU legislation.

However, it should be realised that as science and understanding of animals and their welfare needs have developed, the Five Freedoms are now very much seen as the most basic obligations of those who keep animals. Most enlightened countries and companies aspire to give animals an additional level of care so that they are afforded not merely a basic existence but “a life worth living” or indeed “a good life”.

Nevertheless, this briefing reviews footage recorded in October 2018 of two Finnish fur farms certified by a leading fur industry body as having 'the highest levels of animal welfare', and provides an expert assessment of whether the basic 'Five Freedoms' of animal welfare are, or indeed could be, met for fur bearing animals raised in intensive battery-cage systems.

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst, by ready access to water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.

Many of the foxes in the footage are grossly obese as a result of being fed a diet in excess of their nutritional needs, particularly in relation to their close confinement in small cages. In addition, these animals are likely to suffer from numerous health conditions caused by their unnatural weight.

2. Freedom from discomfort, by providing an appropriate environment, including shelter and a comfortable resting area.

It is clearly apparent that the animals on both farms are kept in completely inadequate conditions for their species. The dirty, dusty cages allow only minimal freedom to express many of their normal behaviours and give no opportunity to escape aggressive encounters with mates, resulting in the severe wounds seen in the footage. Housing on wire floors, ubiquitous throughout the fur farming industry globally, will cause discomfort and pain. There is little if any sign of enrichment to provide even the



Fox with infected eye.

most basic mental stimulation for these highly active and inquisitive species.

3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease, by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.

There is ample evidence of frequent aggressive encounters resulting in severe wounds, such as the mink with an extensive bite wound involving loss of skin from much of their back and tail base. The wound was exuding serum and was grossly contaminated with bedding, suggesting it had never been cleaned, dressed or protected. There is evidence of animals with eye infections, missing eyes, damaged or missing ears, and a fox with a large open wound on their side. Any injuries should require the swift removal of the animals from their cage to an isolation area and the provision of immediate veterinary treatment; there is no evidence of this having taken place. All of the arctic foxes are grossly overweight or obese, which will undoubtedly cause a number of secondary conditions and poor health, such as those seen in the footage and including excessive skin folds, eye infections and excessive weight on joints, leading to “bent” or deformed feet.



Mink living in filthy conditions.

4. Freedom to express normal behaviour, by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and appropriate company of the animal's own kind.

The small, battery-style cages offer little opportunity for the animals to express even a minimum amount of their natural behaviour, which they will have a strong desire to do. Being housed in inappropriately close confinement with other animals has resulted in aggression leading to severe wounds and even death, as seen in the footage.



Mink with open wound.

5. Freedom from fear and distress, by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

All the animals seen in the footage were living in dismal, cramped conditions, many in fear of aggression from cage mates, with little opportunity to engage in activities that they have a strong desire to carry out. They clearly do not lead lives worth living.

Conclusion:

There is no doubt that there is clear evidence from this footage, of supposedly 'high welfare' certified farms, that none of the Five Freedoms are being met. By implication, therefore, the conditions are highly likely to contravene the guiding principles of the OIE, the European Directive 98/58/EC Concerning the Protection of Animals Kept for Farming Purposes, as well as the Council of Europe's 1999 Recommendations Concerning Fur Animals.

More generally, in terms of the conditions under which animals are farmed for their fur, it is highly unlikely that the Five Freedoms could ever be met:

Crucially, the species involved in fur farming have only been kept and bred in captivity for a relatively short time and remain essentially wild animals. These animals all retain very strong desires to range, dig, forage for food and engage in social and breeding behaviour. In the case of mink, they have additional needs to access water for swimming, hunting prey and to regulate their body temperature. The circumstances in which animals farmed for their fur are kept provide no opportunity to satisfy these basic needs, and such unnatural confinement can only result in frustration and crippling mental distress, expressed in stereotypical behaviour where the animal repeats a behaviour, such as pacing, over and over again. These symptoms are regularly seen on fur farms around the world.

In addition, overweight so-called 'monster foxes' and aggression in mink causing injury to themselves through self-mutilation and/or injury to their cage mates are well-known conditions within the industry.

We firmly believe that even the most basic requirements codified in the Five Freedoms are not being met, and indeed could never be met for these species based on the model of confinement in small wire, battery cages. As such, intensive fur farming could never be made, or described as, humane or ethical.

To see the footage referred to in this briefing, visit humaneworld.org/furfivefreedoms

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of animal cruelty and suffering to
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