

Vegan Education in Schools

Ethics course

Years 7 to 12

Lesson 10: Feathers and scales: exposing the violence of the down and exotic leather industries

Overview:

Feathers and reptile skins are often marketed as natural, luxurious, or even humane - but behind every down-filled jacket or crocodile-skin handbag lies a story of brutal exploitation. This lesson exposes the hidden violence in the down feather and exotic leather industries, challenging students to recognise the sentience of all animals, including birds and reptiles, and to reject speciesist justifications for fashion-based exploitation. Students will engage with investigative footage, ethical articles, and abolitionist vegan analysis to confront the truth and build a vision for equitable alternatives.

Objectives:

- To expose the systemic violence in the down feather and exotic leather industries
- To dismantle marketing lies such as 'ethical down' and 'sustainable exotic skins'
- To examine the experiences of geese, ducks, crocodiles, snakes, ostriches, and other exploited animals
- To challenge speciesist assumptions that some animals matter less
- To position abolitionist veganism as the only consistent ethical stance in fashion

Outcomes:

By the end of the lesson, students will:

- Explain how down feathers and reptile skins are sourced and processed
- Identify the suffering involved in these industries
- Critically evaluate greenwashing and 'humane' marketing language
- Articulate an abolitionist stance that includes birds and reptiles
- Reflect and respond through writing or discussion with clarity and empathy

Materials:

- Projector and speakers
- Whiteboard and markers
- Internet-enabled devices
- Student notebooks or digital journals
- Printed handouts: quote bank, myth-busting worksheet, article summaries
- Access to the following video and article resources:

Feathers (Down industry):

- **Video:** [Feathers Are Just as Cruel as Fur](#) - PETA (1:38)
- **Video:** [Alicia Silverstone Helps Uncover the Cruelty of Down](#) - PETA (1:58)
- **Video:** [Sensitive Geese Plucked Alive & Killed for Down Jackets](#) - PETA (2:39)
- **Article:** [Follow the Feathers: Why Down's "Humane" Claims Can't Be Trusted](#) - Sentient Media

Reptile and bird skins (Exotic leather):

- **Video:** [Ostriches Killed for Hermès, Prada Bags](#) - PETA (1:59)
- **Video:** [Pythons Inflated to Death for Leather](#) - PETA (2:02)
- **Video:** [Reptiles Killed for Their Skin](#) - PETA (1:37)
- **Video:** [Vietnam's Crocodile Skin Industry](#) - PETA (3:39)
- **Article:** [Issues in the Crocodile and Alligator Skin Supply Chain](#) - Collective Fashion Justice
- **Article:** ["Exotic" Skins: The Animals](#) - PETA

Lesson steps:

1. Introduction - Fashion's forgotten victims (5 minutes):

- Ask: "Have you ever worn a down jacket? Have you seen crocodile bags in luxury stores?"
- Explain: "Today we look beyond the label to see the individuals who suffer for these products - and why no animal, no matter their species, deserves to be commodified."

2. Down feathers - Softness built on violence (12 minutes):

- Play:
 - [Feathers Are Just as Cruel as Fur](#)
 - [Alicia Silverstone Helps Uncover the Cruelty of Down](#)
 - [Sensitive Geese Plucked Alive & Killed for Down Jackets](#)
- Discuss:
 - Live-plucking, broken wings, untreated wounds
 - 'Ethical' down schemes often allow the same cruelty
 - Birds suffer both for feathers and meat
- Highlight: Follow the Feathers article (Sentient Media)
 - Deconstruct 'traceable' down programs
 - Reveal how birds still face horrific deaths
- Class discussion:
 - Why does suffering persist in certified supply chains?
 - Is there such a thing as humane exploitation?

3. Reptile skins - Blood behind the branding (15 minutes):

- Play:
 - [Ostriches Killed for Hermès, Prada Bags](#)
 - [Pythons Inflated to Death for Leather](#)
 - [Reptiles Killed for Their Skin](#)
 - [Vietnam's Crocodile Skin Industry](#)
- Teach:
 - Crocodiles, snakes, and ostriches are electrocuted, decapitated, skinned alive
 - Reptiles kept in tanks, denied natural behaviours, and killed young
 - These animals are intelligent, sentient, and often denied even basic legal protection

- Articles:
 - [Issues in the Crocodile and Alligator Skin Supply Chain](#) - CFJ
 - [“Exotic” Skins: The Animals](#) - PETA
- Discussion:
 - Why are reptiles not given the same sympathy as mammals?
 - How does luxury fashion use speciesism to justify violence?

4. Connecting the dots - No victims in my wardrobe (5 minutes):

- Ask:
 - Would we accept this treatment if it were dogs or cats?
 - What does true ethical fashion look like?
- Write on the board:
 - “Feathers don’t grow on trees.”
 - “Luxury should never cost a life.”

5. Exit reflection (5 minutes):

- Prompt: “What’s one belief you had about feathers or exotic skins that’s changed today?”
- Students write or record a short response
- Option: turn reflections into an advocacy display or campaign board

Homework:

- **Written reflection (400–500 words):**
“Why feathers and scales have no place in ethical fashion”
 - Include reference to at least two resources
 - Use an abolitionist vegan framework

Extension options:

- Design a digital awareness campaign against ‘ethical down’
- Create a visual fact sheet comparing plant-based insulation (e.g. recycled polyester, hemp) vs down
- Investigate one brand still using exotic skins and write them a formal letter

Differentiation:

- Provide simplified video summaries and vocabulary sheets
- Allow audio or video journal responses
- Scaffold debates with discussion prompts and ethical case studies
- Offer extension tasks for students to analyse fashion branding language

Assessment criteria:

- Demonstrates deep understanding of the systemic violence in feather and exotic skin industries
- Challenges industry greenwashing and speciesist myths
- Clearly articulates a consistent abolitionist vegan perspective
- Reflects with empathy, ethical insight, and clarity
- Engages in informed, respectful debate and discussion