

Hot Take: Vegan Leather Does More Harm Than Good

Using real leather nowadays gets you a bad reputation. “Why are you killing animals?” “Do you not care about the environment?” “You’re abusing animals!”

Look, I get it. I love animals, and I want to help save the planet too. But contrary to popular belief, the answer is not vegan leather. In fact, the answer is also not to stop using real leather. There’s no clear cut answer, but based on the options we have, there’s a third option I believe in.

Vegan leather has been hailed as the alternative to real leather by environmentalists and animal welfare activists. However, vegan leather, for the most part, is just fancy speak for plastic. Specifically, they’re polyurethane (PU) and polyvinyl chloride (PVC). It’s not to say that there are no pros for vegan leather. Products made with vegan leather are inherently cheaper, which makes these goods more accessible to consumers. Also, due to the nature of the material, it’s cruelty-free. As mentioned, while most vegan leather is plastic, there are some uncommon and innovative alternatives that are plant-based, such as cork, pineapple leaves (Piñatex), and mushroom mycelium. Unique materials like those allow for more variety and versatility in terms of color, textures, and designs, which ultimately leads to greater creativity in fashion. Most importantly, plant-based leather has a lower environmental footprint than regular leather, which often involves chemicals and harmful farming practices.

However, most vegan leather is made of PU and PVC. There’s nothing environmentally friendly about plastic that ultimately ends up in landfills, unable to decompose. To get rid of plastic, we need to burn it, and those plastic-infused fumes increase the harm done to our ozone layer. On top of that, even the production of these plastics are harmful, not just to the environment but

also to workers as they involve toxic chemicals. Aside from the environmental issues that vegan leather causes, the quality is also just not up to par with real leather. Pieces made with synthetic materials like PVC and PU are prone to cracking, peeling, and falling apart. Plastic is much stiffer than genuine leather, and goods made with vegan leather simply cannot handle everyday usage. This leads to more frequent disposal and repurchasing of products, which generates more waste. Lastly, for those who are major fashion buffs, they enjoy the feel and aesthetic of leather aging over time. Real leather gets softer and more pliable, but remains durable, throughout time. Synthetic materials like PVC and PU do not produce the same sensory feel or look, no matter how hard designers and producers try.

So what should we do? Taking both sides into consideration, I believe upcycling and repurposing old leather goods into new is the way to go. If companies want to continue to be innovative, take action for climate change, and show they care about their customers' ethos, they would pivot from vegan alternatives to genuine leather in a responsible manner. No new animals are being killed, and no plastic is being produced or tossed in the creation of new products. By taking what is already in the world and turning it into something new, it not only addresses the major environmental concerns over real leather, but also challenges designers and companies to get creative. It's a win-win.

Lauren Hobart

CEO of DICK's Sporting Goods

Strategy note (75+ words): DICK's Sporting Goods is a mega sporting goods retailer, and is the official supporter of Team USA. They sell shoes from multiple brands, like Nike, Adidas, and HOKA, directly to consumers on their own website and at storefronts, but they also are the owner and operator of the Foot Locker Business. Foot Locker Business includes Foot Locker

and Champs Sports, both of which sell shoes as well. However, they do not just sell in the United States. In fact, “DICK’s serves the global sneaker community across North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia, plus a licensed store presence in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia” (“About Us”). Therefore, CEO Lauren Hobart is a leader in the sports retail space. Her opinion on how vegan leather disrupts sustainability efforts has weight, as so many shoes, especially basketball shoes, are crafted with leather.

Moonshaft. (n.d.). *What is Vegan Leather? The Good, the Bad, and Environmental Risks*.

Moonshaft. Retrieved March 23, 2026, from

<https://moonshaft.co/blogs/blog/what-is-vegan-leather-the-good-the-bad-and-environmental-risks>