The screaming of the lambs

How sheep have to suffer for our cuddly merino sweaters

Merino wool is considered a cuddly natural product. But hardly a consumer knows that millions of sheep for sweaters and outdoor jackets are tormented. Even big fashion brands do too little to end the suffering.

By Simone Salden

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There are substances that nature has created so perfectly that a human could not have thought better of them. Wool is such a product. She warms, and she cools. It takes dirt badly, repels sweat and is difficult to burn. And when it comes to merino wool, it is also cuddly soft.

The merino sheep has the perfect curl, so to speak. The fibers of his wool are between 16.5 and 24 microns thick, so extremely fine. The wool of North German dike sheep and human hair are about twice as thick.

The luxury yarn is in expensive men's suits, in winter sweaters and outdoor clothing. The price of the coveted commodity has doubled over the past five years - because demand far exceeds supply. And Germany is considered one of the main buyers of fine wool.

But to make people cuddly, many animals have to suffer. The fashion industry is silent about the topic. Hardly any consumer knows about the agony of the sheep.

And even the few who are interested in the origin of their sweaters, with few exceptions, can hardly be sure that no animal was tormented for their comfort. Few companies know their supply chains accurately. Most, if anything, only superficially address the problem.

The suffering of the animals begins in Australia, from where 88 percent of the fine, high-quality wool come. There are 74 million merino sheep living on the continent, which, as a result of centuries of breeding, have a particularly large number of skin folds and thus produce particularly great and particularly fine wool. But what makes the animals so profitable for the industry makes them susceptible to parasites. Lard flies use the moist skin folds to lay their eggs - the hatching maggots eat the sheep almost alive.

90 percent of the Australian merino sheep are therefore subjected to so-called mulesing. The young sheep are cut out large pieces of skin around the anus. Without anaesthesia. It's a bloody procedure.

Video (1:56) The suffering of sheep

Merino wool is considered a clean natural product. Joint research by SPIEGEL and SPIEGEL TV in cooperation with the ZDF now prove that many merino lambs have to suffer for comfortable sweaters.

The animals are fixed in a kind of metal carousel, lying on their backs, their hind quarters stretched helplessly into the air. Often the tail is cropped at the same time, and the male animals are castrated. Again, this usually happens without anaesthesia. Anyone who has heard the cries of the lambs will not forget it again.

For the few weeks old animals that live in huge herds on isolated pastures, it is often the first contact with a human. "The animals suffer from great pain and great stress," says Hanna Zedlacher of the animal welfare organization Four Paws. "There is blood on this wool." She has been fighting against mulesing for years. "In Australian sheep farming, we are dealing with blatant animal welfare problems."

Mulesing, named after its "inventor" John WH Mules (1876-1946), has been banned by law in many countries for many years - but the Australian farmers are sticking to it. There are already alternatives, local anesthetics, for example, which at least cause the worst pain to the sheep and accelerate wound healing. Above all, there are merino breeds that are resistant to the dangerous insects infestations. But many farmers are reluctant to exchange their herds of up to 10,000 animals for resistant breeds. The mulesing is justified with reference to tradition and economy - similar to the piglet castration in Germany.

For this reason, companies such as Aldi-Süd, Benetton or Tchibo have for some years been renouncing merino wool from Australia. "We think it would be desirable for the Australian wool industry to follow a pathway from the mulesing process accepted by animal welfare organizations," says Stefan Dierks, Sustainability Manager at Tchibo. "The demand from our side is there anyway."

The fact that sheep have to suffer for comfortable sweaters is hardly communicable in times when consumers are increasingly paying attention to the origin of their goods. It is still only about a quarter of Germans important under what conditions the clothes were produced, according to a study of the consumer platform Utopia. But the number of such conscious fashion consumers is increasing. "People are already sensitized to the subject of 'animal welfare', as is already shown by the debates on caged eggs or fur coats," says Wencke Gwozdz, consumer researcher at the University of Gießen. The companies would have to adjust to enlightened customers, especially the young customers asked critically.

The problem: It's difficult for consumers to find out which companies and brands are doing without the bloody wool. This is shown by a joint research by SPIEGEL and SPIEGEL TV, for which an editorial employee first asked a consumer from 34 well-known fashion retailers from Adidas to Zara whether they offer mulesing-free textiles (\*). After all: Two companies answer that they do not buy wool from Australia. Six want to get along with mulesing-free wool in the future. Ten rely on statements from their suppliers that no mulesing has taken place.