



Double Dutch: Debating the Morality of Mink Farming

ON JULY 1, 1999, THE DUTCH PARLIAMENT passed a Motion, 76 to 70, urging the government to ban fur farming. Prior to the vote, the new Minister of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries, L.J. Brinkhorst, stated to the Agricultural Committee that he is opposed to mink farming on ethical grounds but, as a government minister, he is obliged to continue the policy set out by his predecessor, a policy which allows for fur farming. In reviewing the Motion, one is puzzled by the statement, "Recognizing that the purpose of fur production does not justify a continuation of mink farming".

Does this mean the Dutch Parliament:

- prefers us to wear petro-chemical based "fur"?
- is proposing countries waste by-products of the beef, fishing, poultry and dairy industries, "waste" currently utilized by domesticated carnivores on fur farms?
- supports wild harvests as the sole method of producing organic fur?
- is biased against mink farming while favoring other sources of fur and hides such as domesticated foxes, raccoon-dog, cattle, sheep, swine, horses, etc.?
- is attempting to drive the cart without the horse, or in this case, the mink, by asking us to produce mink coats without any mink? A nifty trick if it could be done, and something which would save fur farmers a fortune in feed costs. Who said politics had to make sense?

Making Sense of Nonsense

In an attempt to make sense of this issue, Brinkhorst commissioned a study on the consequences of banning mink farming in the Netherlands. The study, conducted by retired poultry farmer and animal welfare expert Jan van Noord, was released on Sept. 20, 1999.

In compiling his report, Van Noord met with representatives of the Netherlands Association of Breeders of Fur-bearing Animals (NFE)⁽¹⁾ and auction houses, industry suppliers, groups opposing organic fur production, the Dutch Federation of Agricultural and Horticultural Organisations (LTO-Nederland) and other experts on economics, agriculture and animal husbandry.

Commenting on the "[i]rreconcilable differences between the viewpoints held by those in favour of and those opposed to fur farming," Van Noord noted that the fur producers were prepared for a legal battle to defend their rights, and would be backed by LTO-Nederland.

"The scientists I spoke to were astonished that animal welfare had played such a material role in the motion," wrote Van Noord. "They warned that the welfare circumstances described in the motion were totally unfounded, as mink farming does not entail any unacceptable welfare standards. They also stated that the welfare problems encountered in mink farming are less extreme

than those experienced in the farming of chickens, pigs and other agricultural livestock. LTO-Nederland is of the opinion that the mink farming debate is based on unfounded allegations, and supports the [fur breeders] in its opposition of the proposed measures. LTO-Nederland also warned that implementation of the motion may provide a precedent for similar cases throughout the entire agricultural sector."

Van Noord continued that it has been "consistently proven that mink farming does not involve unacceptable welfare standards. ... The motion names the welfare of mink and the objective of fur production as grounds for a ban on mink farming. The former consideration would imply that predators are not suitable for farming and that mink lead a solitary existence in the wild. Both implications misrepresent the facts. Various predatory species have been successfully domesticated and research has repeatedly shown that wild mink spend only part of the year in solitude. Moreover, farmed mink exhibit different behaviour and characteristics in relation to their wild counterpart. It is therefore advisable to disregard the former consideration for the motion.

"It would appear highly unlikely that a majority could be found among EU members in favour of an entire ban on fur farming. In fact, a number of countries have expressed their amazement at the debate currently taking place in the Netherlands.

"... In Denmark, mink are regarded as farm animals, comparable to chickens, pigs and other agricultural livestock. According to the Danes, farmed mink are entirely different to those living in the wild. Domestication has altered its character from that of a shy creature that avoids all contact with humans to one that displays a curious and alert response. The Danes therefore fail to comprehend the point of the debate taking place in the Netherlands. Denmark's largest animal protection society is not opposed to mink farming, as it considers the mink domesticated. This society is campaigning for further welfare improvements, however, and is currently engaged in discussions with mink farmers with a view to achieving this.

"The welfare of captive fur-bearing animals is the sub-

ject of much attention in many member countries. Research is currently being carried out in Denmark. There is also much support for the recommendations passed by the Council of Europe on 22 June 1999, in which standards were set for the housing and care of captive fur-bearing animals, including mink. The Mink Keeping Regulations are based on the Mink Farming Plan of Approach which the NFE drew up in accordance with the recommendations made by Professor Wiepkema. There is little debate as to the acceptability of fur farming outside the EU, although pressure groups are also active there. Slovenia is the only country to have banned mink farming so far.”

Van Noord notes that “little support could be expected for such proposals within the European Union. Further inquiries among the agricultural attachés yielded a similar view. This option offers insufficient perspective for the abolition of mink farming in the Netherlands, and is therefore not recommended.”

“The talks I held and literature I studied made it evident to me that mink farming could not possibly be banned on the grounds of animal welfare.”

Amen.

Morals and Ethics

The Van Noord Report concludes that by passing the Motion, the Chamber must have “struggled with the issue of whether it is morally acceptable to permit the farming and slaughter of animals solely for their pelts,” and recommends that “implementation of the motion be approached from this perspective.”

The Report includes no discussion of the “moral” aspects of an industry that converts waste from human food production into an organic clothing material, fine oils and highly prized organic fertilizer. There is no discussion of how farmed fur complements fur from the harvest of wild animals, stabilizing prices in times of heavy demand so that wildlife caretakers respond to the dictates of biologists, not the market. And the Report included no mention of the costs of the alternative for cold-weather clothing, synthetics from the petro-chemical industry.

If fur is to be evaluated on “moral” grounds, whose morals shall we use?

What Will the Dutch Lose?

The Report skipped the debate on morals and moved on to evaluate the costs of banning mink farming in the Netherlands. Van Noord states that “almost all mink farms have been energetic in implementing” improvements to farm conditions, and that “substantial investments have been made to improve welfare” and in “more ecological manure collection systems.”

The Report then proposes a phase out of mink farming over

a 15-year period and evaluates the consequences of such a ban: the loss of over 1,000 jobs, a heavy impact on family farms run by father/son partnerships, and the transfer of fur-farming skills to other countries.⁽²⁾

Van Noord recognizes that mink farming is “a relatively important industry in the Netherlands, due largely to the ample supply of offal from poultry slaughterhouses and excellent infrastructure. The gross production value of mink farming in the Netherlands amounts to between NLG125 and 150 million annually [\$59-71 million]. Some 2.5 to 3 million pelts are produced on a yearly basis.”

The Report estimates that the fur-farming sector has recently invested a total of NLG120 million [\$57 million] in environmental and welfare improvements, such as upgraded cages and low-emission manure systems, as well as investments by feed manufacturers of at least NLG25 million [\$12 million] during the past three years.⁽³⁾

The Report recognizes that “in the event of an overall ban, poultry slaughterhouses and the fish processing industry would have to find alternative markets for their products. Foreign sales as raw materials for animal feed would appear to be the most obvious options, although this would entail higher costs.”

“In my view,” Van Noord states, “a ban on mink farming in the Netherlands would have an adverse effect on the welfare of farmed mink. Since the motion was adopted, there has been a perceptible decline in the mink farmers’ willingness to implement the Plan of Approach any further. As a result, the envisaged welfare improvements now face serious setbacks and a large percentage of the firms no longer intend to implement them. A Dutch ban would do little to curb mink farming on a global scale. In fact, there is a distinct possibility that Dutch mink farms would simply be relocated to countries where less attention is paid to animal welfare.”

It appears that the Ministry’s own expert has blown holes in the argument against fur farming in the Netherlands. Double Amen.

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(1) Nederlandse vereniging van Fokkers van Edelpelsdieren; www.nfe.nl

(2) Janine Kock of the NFE has confirmed this conjecture (pers. corr.). “If the government will ‘succeed’ in a ban, the 2.5 million pelts, which are produced yearly in The Netherlands, won’t be ‘gone’. The production of these pelts will immediately take place in another country,” she wrote.

(3) These investments have been made to implement measures improving the welfare of farmed mink, known as the Plan of Approach. According to the NFE, as of late 1999, farmers had invested over 60 million guilders (\$28.3 million). When the Plan is fully implemented, in 2005, investments will total approx. NLG120 million (\$56.5 mill.).