When campaigners go undercover, they put their safety, freedom and often lives, at risk. Anonymity is key. This is the first hand account of two anti-fur campaigners who endured the sights, smells and sounds of fur farms for themselves, and the story of the animals who live, and die there…

PUT YOURSELF IN THEIR FUR

Free speech is a right that is worth preserving. Each edition we give our SOAPBOX pages to others to tell us their view of the world.
Fur coats. Fur mittens. Fur trim. These items are everywhere and yet the animals themselves, the fur-bearers, who live and die at our hands to be made into unnecessary luxury items, escape our consciousness. As animal cruelty investigators, our life’s work is to make these animals visible to you. We want to show people how the animals we call “fur trim” are treated, in the hopes of opening your eyes, and creating a kinder world for them.

Our cross-Canada fur farm investigations seemed to consume our entire year. The work is physically draining and emotionally damaging. You could say our nerves were shot. As investigators, we spend weeks preparing before we even set foot in the field; scouring maps, assembling a team and doing research to get a better sense of which farms were more accessible than others. Though farms differ in size and cleanliness, they all have things in common. Some hold captive over 50,000 mink, and some under 1000, but all are kept in long sheds full of tiny cages. Foxes, however, aren’t kept in sheds, but in free-standing cages, lifted about 3 feet off the ground, framed with wood, and with wire walls and floors.

At most farms, the smell of mink feces is overwhelming and we have experienced some respiratory effects from spending so much time in these places. Our eyes start to water and our throats burn after only minutes of being at the dirtiest farms. We can only imagine how the mink suffer, who never get to leave, and who have senses of smell far greater than ours. They live just feet above their urine and feces, getting a short reprieve only when the farm floors are cleaned. When fox are present, their urine has a skunk-like odour that we can smell long before we arrive on the farm. As much as is possible, we steady our hands, and our hearts, and we begin to work quickly and carefully to get our materials, making sure to leave no detail undocumented.

We leave the same way we came: in silence, carrying our equipment, a heavy weight in our hearts, and a determination to change this unnecessary abuse and killing of animals. Once that aspect of the work is done, we spend days at our computers, cataloguing and editing the video and photographs, as well as writing reports on the conditions of the farms.

After a year’s work, we’d visited approximately 150 fox and mink farms across the country. Everywhere, the mink are housed in psychologically and physically damaging small cages. They peer at you through the bars, their paws clasped against the metal, often twisting their bodies into contortions to circle the cage with no chance of escape. The conditions in which the fox and mink live are in complete opposition to how an animal would live in the wild. Mink are solitary creatures that spend a lot of time near, and in, water. Foxes travel miles every day. The cages at fur farms are tiny and they are inhumane. The animals spend their lives trying to find a way out.

Fur farms are a depressing sensory experience. We document the repetitive thumping and moving of their bodies, circling their small cages and gnawing at the bars in attempts to break free. The mothers are especially nervous when humans are near, as they pace to protect and cover their young. Before ever having visited a fox farm, we were told that they
sounded eerily like a child screaming, and this is true. We’ve now experienced this firsthand. They also growl and bark like our companion animals, dogs, do. The stress of confinement also leads to fighting and cannibalism in mink cages. When the kits are older but still in the same cage, our work turns to documenting the carnage of missing ears, snouts and scalps. Some cages hold the remains of mink; nothing left but a skull, or a limb.

Mink and fox farms are often surrounded by forest. We find this particularly cruel. Freedom is within their sight; all around them, in fact, but beyond reach. They can even watch wild animals on the property, and birds soaring overhead. The animals look at freedom from behind bars their whole lives.

The fur industry is a tightly knit community, and as a whole, the bottom line is that they don’t want you to see how they operate. In that, access to doing investigations is often our biggest obstacle. Farms don’t want to give us tours. Farms are surrounded by tall fences and barbed wire, which keeps mink in and unwelcome humans out. There are often guard dogs and security patrols. In every situation, we analyze the pros and cons of accessing a property and proceed despite various obstacles that might be in our way. Once inside the farms, we work against the clock to get the best possible images and footage, despite risks to our safety. The hours fly by. Sometimes we stay until daybreak.

Further to this, to mitigate the risks of our investigative work we abide by our own set of rules, that serve as a set of obstacles as well: we never break locks or climb or cut fences, we never release animals into the surrounding areas, and we try as much as possible not to leave a trace that we’ve been there. These rules are not only to protect ourselves from unnecessary risk or legal action, but also to ensure that we can continue the investigation until such a time that we are ready to send the footage to the appropriate advocacy groups and authorities.

The fur industry knows that it’s in their best interest for the general public not to see what goes on inside. The images that do exist from Canadian fur farms are carefully produced PR pieces; our footage shows what happens when the industry cameras stop rolling, behind closed doors.

What we’ve witnessed on fur farms is, for the most part, “business as usual”. Antiquated laws provide maximum profit for fur farmers, and minimum protection for animals. We believe that people are compassionate, and if they see what the fur industry looks like, without the window dressing, they’ll change their mind about buying and wearing fur. People will change their minds about supporting fur if they see how the animals spend their lives.

We do what we do out of a desire for justice for animals, who are sentient, feeling beings, like humans. We do this work for people, too, who have a right to know and understand what they’re wearing, and what their consumer choices mean. We do this work out of a sense of duty, but we can’t make fur history on our own; we need everyone’s help. Compassion costs us nothing, but means the difference between life and death for billions of fur-bearers who are farmed world-wide each year. While cruelty to others exists, even in the darkest of corners, how can there be peace?

For more than 400 years, the fur trade has exploited animals for economic gain.

Together, let’s

#MakeFurHistory