

Down jackets come with cruel price for animals

By Marie Myung-Ok Lee, Salon

Now that the weather has turned cold, down is having its fashion moment. Every other person seems to be wearing the kind of brightly colored jackets once the province of serious climbers and hikers.

I grew up in the snow-swept tundras of northern Minnesota and am well-acquainted with down's unparalleled warmth for clothes and bedding. The trouble with it then was finding a way to stuff it so that you didn't look like the Michelin Man. With new ways of sewing down into smaller tubular shapes ("baffles" as they are called), fashionable silhouettes are possible. And even after a brief flirtation with Thinsulate, hardcore companies that equip climbers for the real outdoors, like REI and North Face, always come back to down.

What is down? "Down" generally refers to goose down (it is also sourced, but much less frequently, from ducks). It is the soft layer of tiny feathers closest to the bird's body. A single piece of down is called a "plumule," basically a multidirectional puff. These plumules interlock and trap tiny pockets of air – it's actually this layer of air that keeps the cold out and the warmth in. Down provides about three times more warmth per ounce than synthetics; that is, it's warmer and lighter and doesn't mat down over time as synthetics will do.

Even if you are careful to buy only free-range eggs and non-factory farmed meat products, you might be shocked to learn that your comfy and fashionable down may have come at the price of an animal's suffering.

Down is often collected through a procedure called live

plucking. Which is pretty much what it sounds like: A worker restrains the bird and rips out feathers by the handfuls, especially from the goose's underbelly but sometimes also from the back. Often, pieces of skin come off as well, the birds scream in terror and struggle to get away. Sometimes they die from the trauma. Just Google "down cruelty" and you'll find plenty of pictures of miserable, bald and dying geese straight from my nightmare. Animal rights groups contend that this practice encompasses 50-80 percent of all down.

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