

The troublesome **links** between mink farms and factory farming



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Contents

Introduction

Four key conclusions

Minks eat feed from factory farms

‘Mush’ of animal parts

Feed content varies with the season

The feed contributes to depletion of fish

The feed finance factory farming

Mink farms are not a sustainable solution

A reduction in slaughter is needed

Minks are turned into biodiesel

More by-products in feed for family pets

More by-products in feed for family pets

Svensk Mink and Lantbrukarnas Riksförbund

A shared hatred for animal rights-activists

Sources

3

3

6

6

7

7

10

12

12

13

13

16

16

16

17

Introduction

The troublesome conditions for minks in the fur industry are already well known, and the collective opinion against mink farms is strong in Sweden. What is less known is that Sweden's mink farms also contribute to extensive suffering in other animal species. This happens through feed production linked to depleted seas and chicken factory farming. Mink farms have created financial incentives for other animal industries to support them.

In this report, Djurens Rätt show that mink farms in Sweden directly contribute to the death of a minimum of 30 million fish per year, in addition to the hundreds of thousands of minks killed for their fur. Furthermore, mink farms contribute to the financing of chicken factory farming and to the financial motivation of the agricultural community to protect the existence of mink farms.

This report aims to highlight the extensive sustainability risks mink farms contribute to in agriculture and fisheries. As part of this, it also highlights the use of slaughterhouse waste, and that measures are needed to address the significant suffering and food waste taking place in Sweden's fisheries and factory farms.

FOUR KEY CONCLUSIONS

1.

There would be many positive effects of sustainability for several animal species and Sweden's nature if the Swedish mink farms closed.
2.

There are intimate economic links between mink farms and other factory farms, especially within the chicken industry and in fisheries.
3.

Slaughterhouse waste in Sweden is increasing with rising animal production. It is currently not used in a sustainable way.
4.

The animal rights movement may risk creating greater support for mink farms by the farming industry as a whole – and greater resistance to change to more animal-friendly operations – if hateful and violent methods are used.



Minks eat feed from factory farms

The American mink is an active predator exploited on fur farms in Sweden and around the world. In the wild, mink hunt for smaller prey in bodies of water, and similar hunting behaviours are performed if they have access to swimming water in captivity.¹ They are so-called obligate carnivores² and therefore require food containing products from other animals to survive in captivity.

‘Mush’ of animal parts

On fur farms, minks are crowded into small wire cages and given mashed feed made from a mixture of animal protein from fisheries and factory farms. Feed is given 1–4 times a day, often via a feeding machine, and is placed on top of the wire mesh roof.

To only get mashed feed in one place prevents the mink from hunting, chewing, or searching for food. It takes no significant time for them to lick up the food from the roof, which increases stereotypical behaviours such as cannibalism and fur chewing.³

The feed contains products from animals that lived in other factory farms. In Sweden, mainly fresh frozen raw materials from fisheries and factory farms are used, with some grain to fill out the feed. In addition to issues the animals being killed are facing, feed production accounts for 14 out of 18 environmental problems when mapping the environmental impact of mink farms.⁴

As the feed content comes directly from the slaughter of animals, there are several risks associated with bacterial growth. According to a study, there is a link between the amount of faecal bacteria (bacteria from faeces) contained in mink feed and disease in minks, as well as the subsequent antibiotic drug use.⁵ Such contamination of animal-based feed usually comes from the used process of slaughtering animals, and the subsequent storage of the feed at temperatures that favour bacterial growth.⁶ Just like the poor handling of meat for human consumption.⁷

The production of mashed feed, ‘mush’, is mainly done in specialised feed facilities with large freezing facilities. As risk-classified animal by-products are handled, they need a licence to do so.⁸ Mink farms are often geographically close to the feed facilities, unless they have their own feed preparation areas.

Feed content varies with the season

The content of mink feed changes throughout the year depending on the age of the minks. Most amount of protein, at least 45 %, is needed in the summer when mink pups are weaned from their mothers at eight weeks of age.⁹ This is slightly more than what cats need, and several times more than human protein requirements.¹⁰

During the summer, a certain amount of feed is also consumed by wild birds – which can freely enter the shelters where the minks are located. This may result in that up to 10 % of the feed is unintentionally fed to wild birds – which in return risk spreading diseases such as avian flu¹¹ – rather than the minks.

When the feed ends up on the ground, cats and rodents end up digesting some of it, risking both their welfare and the spread of disease.¹² In 2022, the two animal welfare controls carried out on Swedish mink farms,¹³ revealed major shortcomings in the welfare of cats roaming freely on the farms. This highlights that feral cats often end up on mink farms to seek food.

Most feed is consumed by minks in autumn when the pups have started to grow larger and have somewhat free access to their ‘mushy’ feed to grow even bigger for slaughter.¹⁴

Between December and March – after the slaughtering of the pups and when only minks destined for breeding remain on the farm – the breeding females need to lose weight for fertility reasons. Leaner fish, such as cod, are therefore given, mixed with cereals. The amount of pure meat, such as fatty fish (herring) and by-products from chicken factory farms, is limited.¹⁵

In 2021, seven tonnes of cod were fished for feed in Sweden,¹⁶ which may be a significant proportion of what goes to the mink farms' breeding animals during the winter.

Seven tonnes of cod are a minimum of 7,000 individuals per year. *

* If each individual weighs one kilogram

The feed contributes to depletion of fish

Apart from cod, the specific amount of animal species used in mink feed is currently unclear. The clearest evidence is a report from 2021 which states that 3,000 tonnes of herrings go directly to Swedish mink farms per year.¹⁷ The report also states that the figure includes whole fish and contributed to a significant proportion of all fishing.

3,000 tonnes of herrings are a minimum of 30 million individuals per year. *

* om varje individ väger 100 gram



In Finland, 20 % of the mink feed is assumed to be of whole Baltic herring and fishery by-products.¹⁸ Danish mink farms also had a huge demand for the use of whole feed fish, not just by-products. When millions of minks were mass culled due to the risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection, fishing declined significantly.¹⁹ The mink farms' demand for fish has also been highlighted by the fact that a Swedish recipient of herring, destined for feed, – a recipient which previously accounted for 40 % of Sweden's fisheries – has been negatively affected by the mass culling of mink. Their Swedish fish processing plant for feed was shut down during the coronavirus pandemic.²⁰

The agricultural media has also clarified that mink farms contribute to fisheries, with the following quote (freely translated from Swedish):

*"...for a long time now, waste from the fishing industry has not been enough to feed all the minks; the seas are vacuumed solely for the sake of the minks, and other feed products such as corn and cereals are also used to supplement the mink's menu. This means that mink compete with food products that people can eat, and since mink don't produce food, it's a bit skewed when a large part of the world's population is starving."*²¹

Majority of fish are caught solely for feed purposes for fish factory farms and mink farms, including at least 76 % of the total weight of fish caught in Sweden. This means that over 100,000 tonnes of fish were killed solely for feed production in Sweden in 2021.²² According to the BalticWaters2030 foundation, 76 % is on the low end and a more likely figure is around 90 % regarding fishing for feed production in the Baltic Sea.²³ The research institute RISE also uses the figure of 90 % when it comes to fishing for herring to be used for feed purposes.²⁴ According to a conversation with an official at the Finnish Natural Resources Department, 35–50 % of all fished herring were used to feed minks and foxes in 2021.²⁵

This translates to at least 500 million individuals. *

** If 50 % of 100,000 tonnes²⁶ are used for feed in Finland and each individual fish weighs 100 grams*

This depletion of the seas – largely caused by mink farms – has occurred at the same time as herring are on a downward trend in the Baltic Sea, both in number of individuals and in size. This has forced the Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management to implement certain measures to reduce fishing.²⁷ Fishing for feed is unsustainable and represents an economic loss for fishing companies that rely on a declining fur industry.²⁸

In total, current mink farms in Sweden directly contribute to the death of at least 30 million of fish per year, in addition to the hundreds of thousands of minks killed for their fur. Before the pandemic, when there were more minks on mink farms, the number of exploited lives was much higher.



The suffering of fish

In addition to the environmental risks of ocean depletion, fishing for mink feed contributes to a significant amount of suffering. Herrings are generally caught by the method known as trawling, which involves catching them in large nets and subjecting them to both abrasion and oxygen deprivation. They get so injured that almost all fish that get in contact with trawls die, even if they are not removed from the water.²⁹ Trawls also risk catching unintended species, as well as affecting life on the seabed.³⁰ The fish that are caught are then subjected to prolonged asphyxiation in air, if not already dead as a result from the trawling process. Since fish are wild animals, they are not protected by the animal welfare legislation and the requirements for farmed animals during slaughter and killing. Suffocation in air is very painful for fish and takes several minutes, and for some species much longer.³¹

Cod is also trawled, except in coastal fisheries where longlines are used.³² When longlines are used, fish risk having their mouths stuck on hooks for several hours.³³ Moreover, the hooks have often been baited with other fish such as herring,³⁴ and thus entail twofold suffering per catch.

Fish are also raised in fish factory farms, known as fish cultivation and aquaculture in Sweden. There they use fished herring, among others, for animal feed,³⁵ if it not used for mink farms. In the factory farms, fish such as salmon are kept in crowded conditions with no enrichment. The needs and welfare of fish are compromised in terms of opportunities for natural behaviour, risk of injury and disease, stress and pain during handling and transport, and lack of, or painful and ineffective stunning during slaughter.³⁶

The feed finance factory farming

In autumn, mink farms use more meat, oily fish (herring) and by-products from chicken factory farms for feed production. This is to fatten the minks for slaughter and pelting – which takes place in early winter. Mink farms then help keep costs down at Swedish chicken factory farms by buying by-products – that Swedes don't want to eat – directly from slaughterhouses. Mink farms' feed facilities pay up to two Swedish kronor per kilogram of chicken by-products.³⁷

When mink farms were greatly reduced after the mass cull in Denmark in 2020, the costs have instead had to be borne by the chicken factory farms themselves, to produce, for example, biogas from the slaughter waste. A Swedish chicken producer has made a statement, in agricultural media, that the closure of the Danish mink industry had a negative impact on profitability, as the waste now became a cost instead of a revenue.³⁸ At the same time, it confirms the strong links between different factory farms, even across national borders.

If animal by-products are not used for feed they are mostly used for biogas or biofuel production.³⁹ In summary a small proportion of animal waste and by-products can be used for mink feed, and what is used contributes to the profitability of other factory farms.



The suffering of chickens

The average chicken farm in Sweden has around 100 000 chickens per rearing cycle, which is more than in most other EU countries.⁴⁰ Up to 25 chickens can be crowded per square metre.⁴¹

The chickens grow so fast that they suffer from pain. Most get some degree of painful movement restriction in their gait, if they are of a fast-growing breed,⁴² known as turbo-chickens in Sweden. Swedish turbo-chickens are only allowed to live for about 35 days, or five weeks, before they are killed.⁴³

Every year, many chickens die before they even reach the 'set age' of slaughter, either on the farm from disease, stress, and gait problems, or during transport.⁴⁴ Their lives become waste, biogas, or feed for mink farms.

In slaughterhouses, chickens are stunned before bleeding, either by electricity or gas. If electrical stunning is used, the chickens are hung upside down by their feet while fully conscious. This is very unpleasant and painful for them.⁴⁵ Hanging upside down, their heads are placed in an electric water bath to be stunned by an electric shock before their throats are slit and they bleed to death. Around half of the chickens are instead stunned and killed by gassing at Sweden's largest slaughterhouse.⁴⁶ The largest slaughterhouse is the full concept of factory farming, slaughtering over one million chickens per week.



Mink farms are not a sustainable solution

The Swedish fur industry has previously claimed that by feeding the minks with waste products, their contribution has a positive sustainable impact on the country.⁴⁷ However, as explained in the previous chapter, it is now not only waste products that are used. The small proportion of slaughter waste used in mink feed may also be implemented in other areas of use in the future. Mink farms do not exist to help solve the problem regarding the lack of use of animal by-products. Instead, they are helping to support other exploitation of animals, through the purchase of carcasses and slaughter waste for feed.

In the past, spent hens from egg factories were used for mink feed if they were not destroyed (i.e., burnt).⁴⁸ Hens used for feed seem to be in the past. Spent hens from egg factories are something that Swedes ate to a greater extent in the past, before chicken factory farms with turbo-chickens were introduced.

Nowadays the minks used in fur production in Sweden eat fish that should have been allowed to live in the sea, and other animal products that could be used for other purposes. At the same time, the furs are exported to other countries⁴⁹ and do not contribute to any social or economic sustainability goals in Sweden. Furs are not listed in Sweden's most important export goods⁵⁰ and they account for a very small economical income, mainly for individuals running mink farms. According to an estimate made by Djurens Rätt, less than one hundred people were employed in companies linked to mink farms in 2021,⁵¹ and the number has most likely decreased since then due to continued poor profitability. This suggests that the fur industry is not important to Sweden's economy or society. Rather a burden.

In 2020, a total of 22,000 tonnes of food waste was created from Swedish agriculture and fisheries.⁵² In addition, the Swedish Board of Agriculture has calculated how much animal products that did not get to be produced during that year, because of animal injuries and/or deaths on the farm, and concluded that 31,000 tonnes of beef, pork and milk could not be used for food or feed.⁵³ More than 3 million chickens were 'discarded' in slaughterhouses in 2020, representing almost 4,800 tonnes of animal products not used for their intended purpose.⁵⁴

The human quest for cheap and nutrient dense animal products – and fur production – has led to an abundance of animals being bred only to become slaughter waste.

A reduction in slaughter is needed

The amount of animal by-products on the market is increasing as the number of animals slaughtered increases. At the same time, there is a shift from eating all parts of the animal killed to eating fewer parts in the Western world. The Swedish population wants the large breast fillets from chickens, and almost nothing else.⁵⁵ Consumption of intestines

has almost halved since 1990.⁵⁶ This increases the amount of what is seen as 'waste' from slaughterhouses.

A certain proportion of by-products from fisheries and slaughterhouses are currently used directly for human consumption, such as liver, tongue, kidneys, blood, and fish roe. Several other by-products are not considered edible by humans in Sweden, such as pig and chicken feet and stomachs, but are readily consumed by people in other countries.^{57,58} There is also specific production for e.g., goose liver⁵⁹ and fish roe,⁶⁰ where the animals are only or partly reared for the purpose of producing such products. It can then no longer be called a by-product.

A more animal-friendly solution for by-products, from slaughterhouses and fisheries, would be to reduce slaughter over all, and ensure that the animals raised survive up until slaughter. The latter is also one of the conclusions of the Swedish Board of Agriculture's 2022 report about on-farm losses of animal products.⁶¹

Minks are turned into biodiesel

The animal by-products from slaughterhouses and fisheries that cannot be used for food, for example due to infection risks or unpalatability, are currently used for biogas and biofuel production. Animal by-products and food waste are decomposed in several biogas plants, but the largest proportion used is sludge from sewage and factories. 189,000 tonnes of slaughterhouse waste were digested in biogas plants in Sweden in 2021,⁶² which is significantly more than the minks on mink farms can eat. In addition, some of the waste decomposed into biogas are in fact minks, as their bodies are either decomposed, or burned, to produce biodiesel after slaughter and pelting.⁶³

Currently, Sweden imports slaughterhouse waste to produce enough biofuels for our needs. But there is nothing that says that the waste must come from slaughterhouses,⁶⁴ if, for example, slaughter of animals in the world were to decrease.

More by-products in feed for family pets

Large amounts of residues from fisheries and slaughterhouses, but also whole animals, are directly or indirectly fed to family pets via the production of animalic grease products, fish meal and meat meal. Much of the by-products for feed manufacture are now imported into Sweden.

A Swedish feed company has combined the breeding of minks with the production of feed for cats and dogs.⁶⁵ The mink farm went bankrupt in 2022,⁶⁶ suggesting that pet food is a more profitable business today.

It would be beneficial if feed could consist of more by-products than they do today, to reduce the number of animals killed for the survival of our carnivorous family pets.⁶⁷ Cat food does not need to contain pure meat, and dogs can survive and thrive on a plant-based diet.⁶⁸



Mink farms and factory farms are cooperating

We have shown in previous sections the economic interests that exist for mink farms to continue buying by-products from chicken slaughterhouses and fish, among other things. There is some further evidence that the agricultural community, including factory farms, is linked to, and cooperating with, mink farms.

Svensk Mink and Lantbrukarnas Riksförbund

The industry organisation Svensk Mink, which represents the interests of mink farmers in Sweden, has long been a member organisation of the Swedish farmers' union Lantbrukarnas Riskförbund (LRF). As a stakeholder member, Svensk Mink has the right to attend and speak at LRF's highest decision-making body, the general meeting. In addition, the member organisation must "have a purpose and conduct activities that are compatible with LRF's vision, statutes and values".⁶⁹ Svensk Mink is placed at the bottom of LRF's website of interest members,⁷⁰ which may indicate that LRF does not want to advertise Svensk Mink's membership. But a columnist in the LRF-owned newspaper Land Lantbruk has clearly defended the continued existence of mink farms in Sweden.⁷¹

LRF is a lobbying organisation for companies in the green industries, which clearly includes mink farms if they remain in the country. LRF aims to contribute to growth, profitability, and competitiveness for their members.⁷²

A shared hatred for animal rights-activists

Traditionally, it has mainly been chicken factory farms and fisheries that have expressed their support for mink farming. Mainly linked to the fact that they have common economic interests through the feed for the mink, as described in the previous sections. Some have also had a chicken factory farm in combination with a mink farm,⁷³ and thus had close access to feed and contacts for obtaining slaughterhouse waste.

The hatred of militant animal rights-activists, and the fear of being targeted themselves, is probably the biggest reason why farmers are cooperating across production boundaries to support mink farms. As mink farms have been particularly affected by threatening activists, support for mink farmers has become evident from other farmers that may not normally see the raising of animals in wire cages as ethical. On one occasion in 2017, more than 60 farmers went to a mink farm to grill animal-based sausages to both show their support for the farm, and their collective opposition to the threatening animal rights-activists.⁷⁴

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ABOUT DJURENS RÄTT:

Djurens Rätt is the largest animal rights and animal welfare organisation in Sweden. We are striving for a world where animals are respected as sentient beings with the right to their own lives.

To relentlessly stand up for animals is the very essence of Djurens Rätt and has been since the organisation was founded in 1882. Djurens Rätt conducts animal rights advocacy work vis-à-vis parliamentary politicians, municipal politicians, the authorities, EU politicians, institutions, and companies. Each day we are shaping the opinions of the people through articles in newspapers and magazines, interaction via social media, our extensive summer tour and via our campaigns. Our aim is to make as big a difference as possible for as many animals as possible.



