



Super Duper Recyclers *How Fur Farmers Turn Waste into Beauty*

“How many of you recycle? Aluminum? Plastic?” asks mink farmer Ryan Holt. Most of the hands in the group rise. “OK, then,” continues Holt, nodding approvingly, “how do you recycle a chicken?” The hands fall. Confused glances are exchanged. The tall, dark farmer from Utah grins. “How about a pig? A cow? A turkey? A fish? A sheep?”

Holt’s questions always stump the visitors to the Fur Breeders Agricultural Co-op in Salt Lake City, and today’s group of 20 students from a local college are no exception. To a one, they will be visiting their first farmers’ co-op and first farm today. They are urban dwellers, along with over 77% of America’s 278 million people.⁽¹⁾

Where’s the Waste?

With the world population at 6 billion and counting, the number of domesticated animals raised to meet our needs runs into the hundreds of billions. Each year, Americans alone consume 37 million beef cattle,⁽²⁾ 8.5 billion chickens, turkeys and other poultry,⁽³⁾ and over 4 billion pounds of fish and shellfish, some farmed and some wild-caught.⁽⁴⁾

But we don’t consume these animals in their entirety, so where does all that waste go? What happens, for example, to the 235 million laying hens in the US⁽⁵⁾ when they are spent? The average American eats about 250 eggs a year, without a thought for what will happen to the hens that produced them.

In the wild, animal carcasses are efficiently broken down by scavengers, bacteria and the elements. But entrusting Nature to take care of domesticated and wild-caught animal remains is no solution, unless we want some major health scares!

Since humans began domesticating animals 10,000 years ago, we have been feeding the waste from our food production - our table scraps - to domesticated carnivores such as dogs and cats. This continues today, on a massive scale. By one estimate, there are 128.5 million pet dogs and cats in the US.⁽⁶⁾ No wonder the pet food industry is a major recycler of agricultural by-products!

Today, there are many other ways in which we maximize benefit from these by-products. Hides become clothing, feathers become quilts, bones become glue.

And muscle and internal organs become feed for carnivorous livestock in zoos, circuses, marine parks, fish and fur farms. One mink will consume 20 to 25 times its body weight annually, while a fox will eat over 35 times its body weight. One full-length mink coat, made from 50 pelts, equals over 5,000 pounds - 2.5 tons - of recycled food waste, “garbage” to us, dinner to the mink!

In turn, these mink and fox, domesticated carnivores raised on hundreds of farms in over 30 US states, produce a biodegradable clothing product, fine oils and organic fertilizers for crops. Nothing is wasted.

Centrally-Located Co-op

Servicing Alaska, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Nebraska, Texas, Utah, Wisconsin and parts of Canada, the Salt Lake City Co-Op takes the leftovers from fish, beef, poultry, dairy and egg production, and turns them into feed for over 100 fur farms scattered across Utah and Idaho.

On this particular day, Holt leads the tour group past loading docks filled with trucks delivering fishmeal, liver, poultry and expired cheeses from as far away as Alaska, Texas and Wisconsin. A recent delivery of expired eggs lines the walls as forklift operators stack this terrific source of protein into the Co-op’s giant refrigeration room.

But large, centralized recyclers like the Co-op are unusual in the fur industry. Most fur farmers collect the by-products themselves, personally visiting egg farms, packing plants and slaughterhouses around their county. They then mix the materials themselves, carefully measuring the protein, fat and ash content to ensure their animals receive proper nutrition.

Carnivores such as mink and fox are tricky to raise, with varying nutritional requirements during the growing and reproductive phases of their lives. Add to this the constantly changing supplies of materials

for making feed, and the task of meeting furbearers' nutritional requirements becomes an even greater challenge — an exact science!

“We employ a nutritionist,” states Co-op manager Chris Falco as he joins today's tour, “and local veterinarians as well as the Co-op veterinarian are constantly servicing the area's farmers, advising them of the changing dietary and health needs of the animals they raise. It's demanding work but our farmers love a challenge.”

As a measure of the wealth of knowledge at the Co-op, Falco receives regular inquiries on the dietary needs of carnivores from all across the country.

Ryan Holt returns to his tour group. “In North America, mink and fox farmers recycle over a billion pounds of agricultural by-products annually. We turn that waste into nature's insulator, fur, which is simply a leather product with the hair retained. This domesticated production complements fur produced

from animals taken under wildlife management programs designed to ensure healthy populations of animals living on healthy habitats.”

So, who recycles? Fur farmers recycle. The sale of fur products supports the fur farmers' recycling program. And round and round it goes with the Super Duper Recyclers.

(1) The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) projects that 77.2% of Americans will be living in “urban environments” in the year 2000; www.fao.org

(2) FAO: In 1998, 36.9 million head of cattle were slaughtered in the US for beef and veal.

(3) FAO: In 1998, 8.46 billion poultry were slaughtered in the US for meat.

(4) The US consumes approx. 8% of world fish production. For further information, see National Fisheries Institute (www.nfi.org/industry.html) and FAO (www.fao.org).

(5) American Egg Board; www.aeb.org

(6) NPD Group Inc.; www.pfionline.org/facts_n_figures.html