

# Exotic reptile leather: past, present, and future

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**L**uxury fashion has long been synonymous with rarity, craftsmanship and exoticism. Among its most enduring symbols are reptile skins—crocodile, python, lizard—whose textured surfaces evoke both primal allure and refined elegance. Yet beneath the sheen of high-end handbags lies a complex story of cultural symbolism, ethical debate and ecological opportunity. As the world teeters towards the edge of environmental collapse, and reconsiders its relationship with nature, the future of reptile leathers hangs in the balance.

## The reckoning

Reptile skins entered Western fashion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the height of colonial expansion. Prized for their exotic appeal, they offered a tantalising link to new frontiers and tropical euphoria. By the 1920s and 1930s, these materials had become mainstream in European haute couture. Wrestled from man-eating leviathans, worked by master craftsmen and sold as rare artefacts, exotic skins evoked a sense of adventure, mystery and sensuality. As Hollywood's femme fatales bewitched Hemingway's machos, so too did reptile leathers embody the art and literature of the day.

The post-war boom of the 1950s and 60s saw luxury brands such as Hermès and Gucci elevate reptile leather to iconic status. Crocodile and python bags became emblems of wealth and prestige. However, by the 1980s, growing awareness of biodiversity loss led to increased regulation. Multinational agreements such as CITES began monitoring the wildlife trade, and brands faced pressure to demonstrate responsible sourcing.

In the 2010s, the pendulum swung further. Emotive animal rights campaigns pushed major fashion houses—Chanel, Victoria Beckham, Selfridges—to ban exotic skins. Yet paradoxically, demand surged in other markets, especially in Asia. Today, the industry stands at a crossroads as science and sustainability converge to determine its future.

## A counterintuitive opportunity

Surprisingly, reptiles—often overlooked in Western food and agricultural circles—can play a pivotal role in achieving the



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United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially in the Global South. Their ecological and socio-economic value spans multiple targets:

- SDG 1 (No Poverty): Reptile farming and harvesting provide income for rural communities with limited livelihood alternatives.
- SDG 2 (Zero Hunger): Reptile meat is a traditional source of protein throughout the tropics, helping combat malnutrition and food insecurity.
- SDG 3 (Good Health): Reptiles' cold-blooded physiology limits transmission of zoonotic diseases such as Covid-19 and avian flu.
- SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth): Reptiles offer competitive advantages for developing economies, including in remote and marginalised regions.
- SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption): Reptile skins outperform conventional livestock and most synthetic textiles in lifecycle assessments—less water, reduced feed inputs, and no microplastic pollution.
- SDG 13 (Climate Action): Reptile production systems require minimal energy, and produce little waste or greenhouse gases. Wild harvests protect carbon-rich habitats.
- SDG 15 (Life on Land): Economic value incentivises habitat protection and finances ecosystem restoration efforts.

In short, reptiles are not just fashion commodities—they are ecological allies and financiers in the fight for a more equitable and sustainable future.

## Personal choice, but know the facts

The debate over exotic skins often pits two ethical imperatives against each other: animal rights versus environmental



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sustainability. Animal rights advocates argue that killing reptiles for fashion or food is inherently unethical, citing inhumane practices and moral principles. They call for bans and promote synthetic alternatives.

Conversely, conservation scientists and sustainability experts highlight that regulated trade can yield net benefits. Trade supports species conservation, ecosystem services, and social justice. They argue that the trade offers unique opportunities for adaptation and resilience in the face of global uncertainty.

The truth is nuanced. Not all reptile products are responsibly sourced, and not all alternatives are benign. Consumers must weigh provenance, certification, animal welfare, and ecological impact. Transparency, traceability, and informed decision-making are key.

### Toward a sustainable future

Organisations such as the International Multistakeholder Association for Reptile Conservation (IMARC) and the International Crocodylian Farmers Association (ICFA) are leading efforts to reform the reptile skin trade. Founded to promote animal welfare, legal, sustainable, and traceable supply chains, these groups adopt a holistic approach balancing commerce, conservation, and ethics against a backdrop of global change and fast-evolving sustainability challenges.

Beyond trade reform, the future of the reptile trade lies in its ability to catalyse rewilding efforts. The wildlife economy model, championed by IMARC and ICFA, envisions nature as an asset rather than a resource. It integrates conservation with economic development through nature-based products, services, and livelihoods.

In this vision, reptile skins are not relics of exploitation but



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symbols of coexistence. They represent a world where fashion directly supports biodiversity conservation and ecosystem restoration—where creativity meets nature, and wildlife thrives within economies, not outside them.

### Time to take a stand

Reptile skins in fashion are more than a trend, they are a mirror reflecting our values, choices, and relationship with the natural world. Their history is rich, their present contested, and their future promising. As we navigate the incoming tide of global challenges, the fashion industry is responding. Through transparency, science-based animal welfare standards, and community-led conservation, it can provide a roadmap toward the very pinnacle of ethical luxury.

Ultimately, the question is not whether we should wear reptile skins, but how we can ensure that doing so contributes to a world where both people and nature flourish. Fashion, after all, is not just about what we wear—it's about what we stand for. |