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# Exotic leather: Rules, permits and compliance

**Christy Gilmore**, leather expert and Partner at American Tanning and Leather, provides the ultimate guide to importing and exporting exotic leather.

**I**n the global trade of luxury materials, few products rival the allure of exotic leather. Alligator, crocodile, lizard and snake leathers have captivated designers and artisans for generations with their unique patterns, durability and prestige. But behind every legally traded exotic skin lies a sophisticated web of international law designed to protect wildlife while allowing sustainable use.

For brands, tanners and artisans who trade across borders, understanding the rules governing exotic leathers is not just a legal requirement—it is a professional responsibility. The success of your business, and the integrity of the industry as a whole, depend on strict compliance with Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) regulations, shipping protocols and national wildlife laws.

This guide provides a clear overview of how to legally import

and export exotic leathers. It includes what every stakeholder in the supply chain must know to stay compliant and responsible.

## CITES: What is it and why it exists

CITES, established in 1975, is the backbone of the global wildlife trade framework. It now includes 184 member countries (Parties) that cooperate to ensure that international trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

CITES regulates more than 40,000 species, including nearly all reptiles commonly used in the leather trade. Each Party designates two key bodies:

- **Management Authority:** Issues trade permits and monitors compliance.
- **Scientific Authority:** Ensures that exports are sustainable and do not harm wild populations.

The treaty's goal is not to stop trade—it is to make sure trade is legal, traceable and contributes to long-term conservation. When managed correctly, species such as the American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) and the Nile crocodile (*Crocodylus niloticus*) stand as global success stories of sustainable use, where regulated trade directly supports species recovery and habitat protection.

## Understanding CITES appendices

CITES divides species into three appendices based on their conservation status and trade restrictions:

- **Appendix I:** Species threatened with extinction. Commercial trade is generally prohibited, except for exceptional non-commercial purposes such as scientific research or breeding programmes.
- **Appendix II:** Species not currently endangered but that could become so if trade is not controlled. Commercial trade is allowed with valid CITES export permits. Nearly all commercially used crocodylians, lizards and snakes fall under Appendix II.
- **Appendix III:** Species protected in at least one country that requests international cooperation to help monitor and control their trade.

Designers and importers can confirm a species' listing and trade status using the official CITES Species+ Database ([www.speciesplus.net](http://www.speciesplus.net)), which identifies the appendix level, range countries and any special notes on restrictions.

## Not all exotic leathers require CITES permits

Not every exotic leather falls under CITES regulation. Some fish leathers such as perch, tilapia or stingray, and certain non-listed reptile species, are not included in the appendices and therefore do not require CITES documentation.

However, this does not mean they are unregulated. Every country enforces its own customs and wildlife laws, and these may still apply. Before purchasing or shipping any exotic material, it is critical to verify the species' legal status both under CITES and under domestic legislation in the exporting and importing countries.

Designers and traders are encouraged to check the CITES database directly and confirm whether a species is listed, and if so, under which appendix. Remember: ignorance of the law offers no protection at the border.

## National laws and stricter domestic measures

CITES set the global baseline, but individual countries are free to adopt stricter domestic measures, and many do. This means a species legally traded in one country may be restricted or even banned in another.

A key example is the Siamese crocodile (*Crocodylus siamensis*), which is legal to trade in Europe and much of Asia under CITES Appendix II, yet not legal to import into the United States due to stricter domestic legislation under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

Similarly, under the U.S. Lacey Act, it is illegal to trade in any wildlife product that was taken or exported in violation of another country's laws.

In short, a valid CITES permit does not guarantee entry. Traders must research and comply with each nation's domestic wildlife laws in addition to international obligations.

## Legal vs illegal trade

In exotic leather trade, "legal" and "illegal" are defined not only by species but also by documentation. Even a legally sourced skin becomes illegal the moment it crosses a border without the proper permits or is declared incorrectly.

Common infractions include:

- Missing or expired CITES permits; CITES permits without validation stamps.
- Mismatched tag numbers.
- Incorrect species names.
- Misdeclared product descriptions (for example, "leather goods products small" instead of "leather goods products large").
- Miscounted items in a shipment.
- Shipments accidentally clearing customs operations before clearing wildlife authorities.
- Incorrect airway bill numbers on a wildlife declaration.

Any of these errors can result in seizure, destruction of goods, fines, or prosecution. Legal trade depends on maintaining a complete, verifiable chain of custody from source to final product.

## CITES permits: The passport for trade

Every CITES-listed species shipment requires the correct permit documentation:

- **Export Permit:** Issued by the exporting country once legality and sustainability are confirmed.



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- **Import Permit:** Required by some jurisdictions such as the EU and Australia, even for Appendix II species. Typically, only issued when a valid CITES export permit is presented.

- **Re-Export Certificate:** Needed when re-exporting CITES materials previously imported. For example, when tanners sell finished leather to an overseas brand.

- **Pre-Convention Certificate:** Used for specimens obtained before a species was first listed under CITES.

Each permit must include:

- The correct scientific and common name.
- Source code (W for wild, R for ranches, C for captive-bred).
- Quantity and description (for example, 150 crust skins or 12 handbags).

- Serial numbers matching the CITES tags affixed to the items.

Many countries now include barcodes on CITES permits or tags to streamline customs processing, but the system remains largely manual. Always ensure that originals accompany the shipment and that copies are securely retained by both the exporter and importer for at least five years.

### Shipping compliance and customs procedures

Because exotic leathers fall under wildlife trade controls, they must pass through designated ports authorised for CITES clearance. Examples include Miami, New York and Los Angeles in the United States, and Milan, Paris and London in Europe.

To prevent costly delays or seizure:

- Always declare goods with the full scientific name.
- Use correct Harmonised Tariff Codes for reptile leather.
- Separate species in packaging and label tag numbers clearly.
- Work with freight forwarders and customs brokers experienced in handling CITES materials.

Pre-approving permits and verifying documentation before shipment saves time and ensures compliance. Many exporters maintain active communication with customs and wildlife officers to guarantee seamless entry and exit.

### Travelling with samples: Rules for designers and brands

Designers, brands and sales representatives often travel internationally with samples for trade shows or presentations. As these items remain commercial goods, they typically require CITES documentation even when not for sale.

There are three main legal pathways:

1. **CITES Travelling Exhibition or Commercial Sample Permit (Carnet):** A multi-entry document valid for up to three years, functioning like a passport for samples.

2. **ATA Carnet:** A customs document issued by chambers of

commerce that allows temporary duty-free import of samples or display goods when used in conjunction with CITES paperwork.

3. **Personal Effects Exemption:** CITES allows individuals to carry limited quantities of personal items such as a belt, handbag, or boots made from CITES-listed species for personal use. However, this exemption does not apply to items intended for sale, display or business use, including runway or sales samples.

It is also important to note that not all countries recognise personal effects exemptions. For example, China does not permit entry of CITES-listed personal items without valid permits. Travellers entering China with exotic leather goods, whether for personal use or exhibition, must have the appropriate documentation in hand to avoid confiscation or penalties.

### Record keeping and traceability

Traceability has become a defining feature of responsible exotic leather trade. Brands and manufacturers should maintain meticulous records of every CITES permit, tag number, invoice and shipping document.

Although some authorities have adopted barcode systems for easier tracking, CITES remains largely a paper-based process. This means that accuracy, organisation and redundancy—keeping multiple copies of permits—are crucial.

Meticulous record keeping not only satisfies legal obligations but also enhances brand integrity by demonstrating responsible sourcing and transparent supply chains.

### Compliance as a pillar of conservation

Far from hindering trade, CITES enables it, ensuring that species are conserved through sustainable use. Programmes such as Louisiana's wild alligator management system, Australia's crocodile ranching model and Indonesia's python harvests show how well-regulated trade provides economic incentives for habitat protection and scientific monitoring.

When brands comply with CITES and national laws, they become active participants in conservation. Every legal shipment reflects a functioning partnership between governments, industry and science, one where commerce and conservation coexist productively.

### Conclusion

For those who work with exotic leather, understanding CITES and national wildlife laws is a professional necessity. Compliance protects your business, your supply chain and the very species that make this industry possible.

By ensuring that every skin, offcut and finished product is traded legally and responsibly, the global leather community continues to demonstrate that luxury and sustainability are not opposing ideas; they are inseparable values. |

## Biography



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Christy Gilmore is a fifth-generation tanner, conservation advocate and international policy consultant. She is a Partner at American Tanning and Leather in the U.S., works closely with global wildlife conservation organisations and champions science based, sustainable use of crocodylians across policy, conservation and luxury fashion sectors.