



Checks and balances in the exotic reptile leather trade

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Reptile leather is renowned for its aesthetics, longevity and, most recently, its sustainability qualities. The latter accolade offers a unique response to some of the planet's most pressing challenges, like climate change, loss of biodiversity, and food security. But this strength comes with trade-offs and potential side-effects, risks that both need mitigating. Sourcing of reptile skins requires responsible practices coupled with extraordinary governance for it to be sustainable across diverse landscapes and remote supply chains. To help ensure that reptile leather is sourced in a way that maximises benefits and minimises risk, a variety of regulatory and voluntary frameworks have been established. This article explores these multifarious and sometimes poorly understood structures in more detail.

International Trade Controls

Because the reptile skin trade involves wild animals, governance typically begins with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) - the world's oldest and largest global conservation network.

Established in 1948, the IUCN includes over 1400 organisations and more than 18,000 scientists. One of IUCN's key functions is to assess the conservation status of species, whether traded or not, in their natural habitat. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species categorizes each species based on a range of attributes, including trade-related threats. Categories range from "Least Concern" to "Extinct". The Red List serves as a critical tool for conservation

planning and therefore plays an important role in informing trading risks for certain wild species.

The IUCN works closely with CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. Established in 1973, CITES embodies an international agreement between 184 countries aimed at ensuring that global trade in wild species does not threaten their survival. It regulates the import and export of species through a system of permits and certificates. Species are listed in three appendices based on the level of protection they require (Appendix I, II, or III). CITES also makes provisions for Stricter Domestic Measures, allowing countries to enhance oversight through the inclusion of national policies and frameworks. In effect, the IUCN supplies the conservation science and sustainable use guidelines, CITES applies the legal and regulatory framework for their trade, and then it's up to the countries themselves to implement those 'rules' in their national context.

Between the IUCN and CITES, international conservation monitoring and control measures have oversight of all reptile species traded internationally for their skins.

National Trade Controls

While the IUCN and CITES provide overarching guidance and frameworks, the responsibility of implementation and enforcement falls primarily on national governments. Each country adopts and enforces specific laws to regulate, monitor, and control the reptile trade within its borders. Most countries have one or more wildlife-centric acts that detail relevant



national laws and legislature. Acts are typically administered by government agencies or departments, and these appoint dedicated CITES Scientific and Management Authorities to assist in ensuring sustainable trade. Some national legislative frameworks focus primarily on protecting threatened species, but most adopt a more holistic and balanced approach that includes support for the sustainable use of natural resources. Most countries include specific laws that ensure alignment with international agreements, such as CITES and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Product sustainability Standards and Certifications

Voluntary sustainability standards and certifications play an increasingly important role in further verifying the integrity of wildlife-based raw materials. Two multi-stakeholder initiatives and a number of other schemes have been established to help improve the operating environment of the reptile skin trade.

a) International Multi-stakeholder Association for Reptile Conservation (IMARC)

The Responsible Reptile Sourcing Standard (RRSS) is managed by the International Multi-stakeholder Association for Reptile Conservation (IMARC). Version 1.0 (June 2023) was developed through public consultation in accordance with ISEAL standards. It outlines requirements for the highest standards for sustainable sourcing of snake and lizard skins.

The RRSS is applicable globally and covers both farming systems and wild harvests. The core aims and principles include responsible business practice, animal welfare, social responsibility, and environmental responsibility.

The RRSS uses a multi-tiered assessment framework with categories that range from Critical Requirements through to Good Practice that have no bearing on core certification but have important impacts on sustainability and global good. For example, it requires abiding with minimum holding and transportation times of animals to be certifiable, but also rewards excellence in cross-cutting initiatives that help to address climate change resilience and biodiversity conservation in vulnerable landscapes and communities.

IMARC has developed a bespoke traceability app (Reptile Trade Monitor available via Google Play and Apple App Stores) that works in conjunction with CITES compliant tags to facilitate scientific monitoring and real-time traceability of individual skins.

b) International Crocodilian Farmers Association (ICFA)

The International Crocodilian Farmers Association (ICFA) is a global coalition of alligator and crocodile producers dedicated to

certifying farms to the highest standards of animal welfare. It also includes optional requirements for environmental stewardship, and social responsibility. ICFA's science-based protocols address key areas such as animal health and behaviour, environmental performance, and labour practices.

Certification requires passing independent third-party audits and inspections, and providing credible, verifiable assurance that farms meet or exceed international benchmarks. Each skin is traded under the CITES regulation, which requires a CITES-compliant, tamper-proof serialized tag, ensuring proof of origin. For customers, ICFA certification offers confidence that sourcing is backed by rigorous oversight and accountability at the farm level.

c) Other Initiatives

Some companies have developed additional measures to ensure best practices. The privately-owned Standard for Responsible Crocodilian Production (SRCP) is a product certification scheme for crocodilians. The SRCP covers five chapters extending from biodiversity conservation and environmental responsibility, to science-based animal welfare and farm management, and social responsibility, including human rights, occupational health and safety and impact on local communities. Through third-party certification and a fully traceable program, the SRCP gives the luxury sector the tools to guarantee a responsible sourcing of reptile skins. Another notable privately-owned sustainability certification scheme is the LPPS (Lizard Procurement and Processing Standard) for the capture and processing of monitor lizards in Malaysia.

With the rapid advances being made by the exotic leather sector, the intention is to phase out privately-owned initiatives in favour of standardisation at the global scale.

Trade-offs and side-effects of the reptile trade

Regulating the trade in reptile skins is not without challenges. Weak enforcement, corruption, and limited resources for surveillance are realities throughout much of the remote landscapes where reptiles are most abundant. Collection of reptiles often occurs in areas of high biodiversity and, although mostly a legacy issue, illegal trade still persists in a few cases. Lack of coordination between countries and agencies, and inadequate penalties, further hinder effective regulation.

At the finer scale, limited data on harvesting impacts and ecosystem health can hinder effective management. Informal or traditional practices may lack proper documentation, and ensuring fair benefit-sharing with local communities while preventing overharvesting can further add to the difficulty of ensuring compliance. And finally, an animal harvested is an animal killed, which can emotionally impact a significant number of people, particularly in urbanised western societies.

Nevertheless, these challenges are not uncommon in most raw material supply chains, even within mainstream agriculture. Associations like IMARC and ICFA were founded to tackle these very issues, and so far, year on year commitments have proven highly successful in mitigating many of these risks.

Towards a more sustainable future for reptiles and people

As the intermingled shadows of climate change, resource deficiency, and pandemics continue to threaten livestock systems around the globe, the relative importance of the reptile trade is likely to increase. Consumer demand for nature-based materials will replace plastic-based synthetics, and responsibly sourced reptile leather will continue to shape the future of sustainable fashion. Through industry collaboration, government support, and consumer advocacy, these systems are currently in the making. Our knowledge and understanding of this inevitable truth has never been greater - and perhaps so too the allure of reptile leather has never shone brighter. |