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## Price of mink nears record but ethical row over fur trade continues

Suzy Jagger in New York

At the Copenhagen fur auction three weeks ago, Danish was hardly spoken. While the auctions are conducted in English, the dominant languages among the 300 or so fur traders, brokers and manufacturers assembled to bid for mink pelts, sable and chinchilla are Mandarin and Russian.

Surging demand from China and Russia for fur – in particular for mink – has pushed the mink price to record levels over the past two years. Most sought-after are American and Scandinavian pelts, perceived to be the best in the world.

According to statistics compiled by the US Department of Agriculture, since the late 1990s the US mink price has more than doubled, while the average cost of an American pelt has risen by 27 per cent over the past three years. At the Copenhagen auction, brown male minks fetched as much as \$60 each (£30.10), a shade off the record \$60.90 set last year.

Mink appears to be back in vogue. After high-profile campaigns in the early 1990s against wearing fur, sales stagnated, but over the past decade the fur industry fought back with a global marketing campaign.

Harry Sitalides, the co-owner of Connecticut Furs, said that clothes designers have tried to use fur differently, compared with the traditional mink coats. "Fashion has changed," he said. "We now see fur as any other fabric. It's just another piece of cloth. We use fur for trimmings, but also weave it with other materials and dye it. The average age of a woman who now buys a fur coat has fallen dramatically. Twenty years ago my main customers would have been the older woman."

Mr Sitalides explained that demand for fur had been buoyed by Chinese manufacturers, who buy American pelts to stitch themselves and sell back to the United States.

Fur trade groups claim that the stigma associated with wearing fur no longer exists, with Britain one of the fastest-growing markets in the world. Some furriers claim that the apparent success of the fur sales is because fur is a green commodity.

Keith Kaplan, at the Fur Information Council of America, said: "Fur is the grand-daddy of green. It comes from a renewable, sustainable resource. There is very little pollution involved in the production of it and it is biodegradable."

Retail analysts are less optimistic about the short and medium-term outlook for luxury items such as fur. The slowing of the US economy and the fallout from this summer's credit crisis are expected to bring a fall in sales of aspirational, luxury items such as a mink coat. Fred Crawford, a partner in Alix Partners, the retail consultancy, said: "We expect 2008 to be a year where the luxury end of the high street slows. When a slowdown hits, aspirational shoppers trade down."

Equally bearish and sceptical about the long-term success of America's fur industry is Matt Rice, a spokesman for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals [Peta], who pointed out that there are a number of designers who have already publicly boycotted using fur in their designs, such as Calvin Klein, Polo Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger.

"There is an even greater stigma to wearing fur now," he said. "There are no federal laws in the US protecting animals who are used in the fur trade. Animals such as minks sometimes face an excruciating death – they are electrocuted internally to leave their pelts intact."

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