



# Re-Inventing Magnificence: Gaining Status from Contribution Not Consumption

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**ABSTRACT** Most luxury consumers link rarity to higher status. It may be a luxury car, yacht, haute-couture fashion and accessories, prestige holiday destinations such as Venice, or purchasing "exotic" wildlife products. For some, legal luxury is not enough to fulfil their status need and they take a step into a world of illegal consumption; this is the case for the buyers of rhino horn in Viet Nam. The desire for rare wildlife "products," both legal and illegal is increasing rapidly. Legally, the desire to supply means species are both captive bred en masse and legally harvested from the wild to fulfil the demand. Illegally, criminal syndicates have moved beyond simply exploiting the existing demand to manufacturing new markets using the same principles luxury goods manufacturers have used for decades to trigger desire and purchasing decisions. Uncurtailed luxury consumption of exotic wildlife "products" is driving

the illegal poaching and unsustainable harvesting of many species. Extinction is a direct result of the “vulgarity of desire” for luxury goods made from endangered species. Battling this trend requires a different approach to traditional conservation methods. **Nature Needs More** utilises an innovative approach to wildlife conservation, that of “demand reduction.” But demand reduction alone is not enough, there is a need to redirect desire away from both legal and illegal consumption of exotic and endangered species. **Nature Needs More** combines demand reduction campaigns in SE Asia with work to revive and reinvent Magnificence, a concept steeped in history but subverted by luxury in recent centuries. This paper outlines **Nature Needs More**’s research in the field, and the mechanisms by which we can provide elites with an alternative to fulfil their self-image and status needs based on contribution instead of consumption of our most fragile heritage.

KEYWORDS: luxury consumption, endangered species, magnificence, demand reduction, exotic wildlife, sustainability,

## Introduction

Excessive, unchecked consumption is accelerating biodiversity loss, reducing our ability to save pristine environments, historic places, diverse cultures, and, indeed, the planet as we know it. The growth in consumption-oriented behaviour of wealthy societies has driven the world into what is now increasingly termed the Anthropocene epoch; a period in the history of the planet where human economic activity is the dominant influence on both the climate and global ecosystem.

In May 2019, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) released the first-ever global assessment of the health of biodiversity and ecosystems, the most comprehensive report of its kind. The finding that approximately one million species are now threatened with extinction should be alarming, particularly as direct exploitation for trade was confirmed as the second biggest threat to species survival, having a greater impact even than climate change.<sup>1</sup> The coming decade is, in all likelihood, the only remaining timeframe to stem this biodiversity loss to any great degree. But while the trade in wildlife has been termed one of the most lucrative trades in the world, currently there seems to be little incentive for change.<sup>2</sup>

Such a change is dependent on a number of stakeholders and each must be willing to play their part in such a transformation. There is a role for the individual consumer, and groups are emerging that are committed to lifestyles incorporating veganism and “zero waste.” But it must be acknowledged that opting out of the current

consumption addiction requires both a secure identity and massive willpower *not* to conform. Social status, self-identity and self-worth have been more strongly linked to consumption with the growth in advertising and accelerated in recent decades by social media.<sup>3</sup> Such promotion has also helped to build tribal identities around the themes of sustainability, around fashion, food, travel, and lifestyles. But just how much is genuine versus greenwashing? Can claims of sustainable products, services and experiences be validated?

Given these imperatives, other stakeholders also have a role to play in this transformation. Business, including global consulting companies and industry groups, regulators, governments, and intergovernmental organisations must play their part. There is also a role for the mainstream and social media together with their influencers; the judiciary and academia also need to become agents for this change.

Even though the hurdle for the individual consumer to drive systemic change quickly is difficult, it is a starting point and there are historic examples of how changing consumer expectations can drive rapid change.<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing, the world is in the grip of a pandemic, which has occurred because the line between humans and exotic animals has long been breached for the purpose of trade. Hopefully this catastrophe will prompt us to reflect; as the prominent environmentalist Jane Goodall warns: “Humanity will be finished if we fail to drastically change our systems in response to the coronavirus pandemic.”<sup>5</sup> Goodall blames the emergence of COVID-19 on the over-exploitation of the natural world, a view she is not alone in holding. Gus Speth, an American environmental lawyer and advocate, has observed:

I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that.<sup>6</sup>

Nature Needs More is an Australian registered charity based in Melbourne, it is volunteer-run and receives no government funding. Initially launched to create demand reduction campaigns to tackle the illegal trade in endangered species, in 2017 the organisation's directors reached the conclusion that the illegal trade cannot be decisively tackled until the selfishness, greed and apathy associated with the “legal” trade in endangered species are first addressed and overcome.

Sustainability may be the word on everybody's lips, but in its current form the sustainable use of endangered species cannot be validated.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the legal trade in wildlife has not been factored into the evolving sustainable fashion strategy.<sup>8</sup> One of the most fragile “components” of the luxury fashion business has been left out of the sustainability conversation—endangered wildlife. COVID-19 is the result of business, including luxury retail and fashion, refusing to

acknowledge this most fragile component in its supply chain. What needs to happen for the luxury industry to break out of this tunnel vision? Sadly, the use of endangered wildlife species by the fashion industry falls into a no-man's land between vegan fashion and the mainstream's acceptance of any animal products in fashion, their main area of overlap being reduced to animal welfare concerns.

This article introduces some of what needs to be addressed from an individual perspective, moving from awareness-raising, to demand reduction, redirecting-desire and re-inventing Magnificence—to gain status from contribution not consumption. But individual transformation is not enough, the article will show, systemic change is also needed. Unless consumers of products featuring endangered and exotic species are dedicated and tenacious in their research, it is difficult to realise the negative implications of purchasing such products. The massive advertising spend of luxury brands has for decades produced images of the luxury lifestyles of influencers, individuals who have the power to sway potential buyers of a product, service or brand by promoting or recommending them on social or traditional media.<sup>9</sup> Given the profits that can be made legally from the trade in endangered species, glossy images portray how comfortable influencers, of all ages, are wearing endangered or exotic species. This has the effect of desensitising and normalising consumers to this trade and, in turn, some consumers take the final step into the illegal trade, linking their status to something so rare they hope to demonstrate their own uniqueness and power.<sup>10</sup>

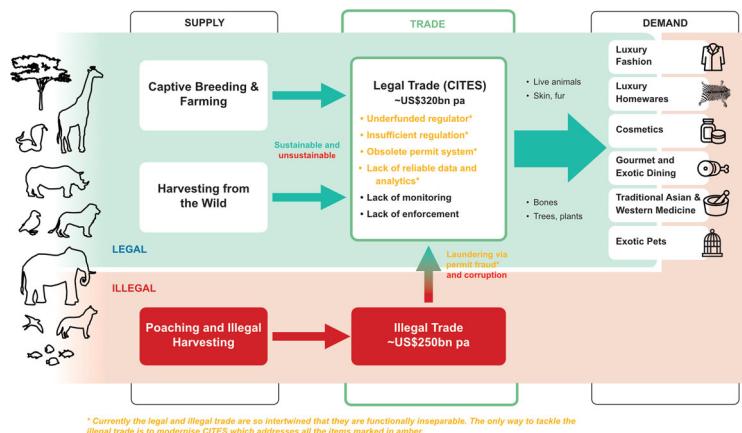
Amid this onslaught, where huge investments are made in brand and perception management how do we trigger behaviour change in more affluent people to reject both legal and illegal luxury consumption of endangered species? There is a growing body of evidence that affluence is killing the planet.<sup>11</sup> A pivot back to a new form of Magnificence is needed, where elites gain status from contributing to the rehabilitation of wildlife and the natural world, and not from consuming it. But how do we make conservation the new black?

### **The Scale of the Problem**

The May 2019 Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) confirmed direct exploitation for trade as the second biggest threat to species survival, greater even than climate change.<sup>12</sup> What is the value and volume of this legal trade? Only estimates can be found in the available literature, all err on the conservative side. A 2016 European Parliament Report estimated that the legal trade in wildlife was worth €100 billion to the EU alone and stated: "the legal trade in wildlife is one of the most lucrative trades in the world."<sup>13</sup> A 2012 report by the UK Government, estimated the global legal trade in endangered species to be worth US\$320 billion annually.<sup>14</sup>

As a species becomes rare, then sadly it becomes more valuable. The value of endangered species means much of this trade is for the

luxury sector. According to Bain & Company's Fall-Winter 2018 Luxury Goods Worldwide Market Study, the overall luxury market grew 5 per cent in 2018, to an estimated US\$1.32 trillion.<sup>15</sup> Endangered species are used to add value to the luxury market through personal luxuries, including apparel, jewellery, beauty and wellbeing products. They are also used in architecture, high-end furniture and housewares, luxury hospitality, fine dining and gourmet food. The exotic pet industry also plays a role, as does luxury travel including trophy hunting. This list is by no means exhaustive.



**Figure 1**

Lack of supply chain transparency results in the legal and illegal trade being so intertwined that they are currently functionally inseparable.

Image: © Nature Needs More Ltd.

The growth in the legal trade of endangered species parallels the growth in the overall luxury market. In 1981, only 700 species were listed under CITES.<sup>16</sup> Today, nearly 36,000 species are listed, of which 34,500 can be traded commercially with the required CITES permits.<sup>17</sup> For the fuller picture it must be noted that research published in 2019 highlighted that species identified by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List as being threatened from trade must on average wait 12 years for protection under CITES.<sup>18</sup> Some species have been waiting up to 24 years to be listed under CITES. Throughout this time these species can be traded commercially with no restrictions or monitoring (Figures 1–7).

In the past four decades the number of consumers with high discretionary spending has grown rapidly.<sup>19</sup> This has not only been the result of the growth of the Western middle classes, but also the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe brought a massive wave of new consumers, as did the rise of China and South East Asia. These newly cashed-up consumers bought into the model of social status, self-identity and self-worth that is linked to consumption.<sup>20</sup>

The paradox is that luxury consumption for status gain is both tribal and competitive.<sup>21</sup> It is tribal because meaning is conveyed primarily to the “in-group,” almost everyone wanting to be seen as equal to their rich peers will consume the same luxuries and be seen as distinct from “lower” groups. But social differentiation inside the elite group is also sought, through the relative level of consumption and the specific types of goods, services and experiences that are bought and displayed. Once everyone has the “standard,” manufactured luxury items expected by “the tribe,” some in the elite group will aim to differentiate with legal “rare” luxury ticket items. Because of our continued destruction of nature and over-exploitation of wildlife, rarity is now firmly associated with many iconic and “desirable” species. Elephants, lions, tigers and rhinos are valued for their body parts and many rare birds, reptiles and marine species are “showcase” exotic pets, worth tens of thousands of dollars.<sup>22</sup>

This is best explained with an example. There is a growing demand for marine coral and ornamental fish. Bankers, CEOs, hedge-fund managers, surgeons and celebrities are key customers ordering bespoke aquariums.<sup>23</sup> Integrated into the building design, sometimes as custom floors, marketing materials talk about customers being given the impression that they can walk on water. With installation costs that can be over US\$1.5 million and maintenance of as much as US\$35,000 per month, architects create ever more elaborate “indoor oceans” advertised as anything from art and sculptures to furniture, entertainment or custom walls and floors to complement the décor of a residence. Other marketing materials refer to personal wellbeing associated with the merging of indoor and outdoor spaces. An individual tank can feature 1,000 fish of more than 100 species. Over 98 per cent of ornamental marine fish species used in aquariums are collected from the wild.<sup>24</sup> The international trade in marine ornamental fishes is estimated to be worth over US\$1.5 billion with some species selling for up to US\$20,000 per specimen.<sup>25</sup> Yet at the time of writing, CITES is still begging for the US\$300,000 to conduct research into the risks of the marine ornamental fish trade to species survival.<sup>26</sup>

Status competition and demonstrating continued “belonging” to the in-group pushes some individuals to move beyond legally procured luxury wildlife “products” into the illegal trade. The consumption of rhino horn became a status symbol in Viet Nam, with men giving it as business gifts to strengthen their professional networks and secure lucrative deals.<sup>27</sup> Rhinoceros are a CITES Appendix I listed species, meaning no international commercial trade is allowed.<sup>28</sup> These men want to demonstrate status and power, to show that they are part of an elite network. The social differentiation of being able to give rhino horn to someone you want to impress also means that horn from farmed, domesticated rhinos holds no interest to this consumer group.<sup>29</sup>

Given farmed rhinos have no status, while the desire for rhino horn remains, the poaching of the wild cohort will continue. How would they know where the horn comes from, farmed or wild? Interviews with these men confirmed that if they didn't trust their supply chain to give them what they wanted, then they asked for the ears and tail of the rhino to be part of the shipment, so they know the rhino has been killed and so the horn is much more likely to have come from the wild.<sup>30</sup> This desire has resulted in one rhino being killed for its horn every eight hours. The scandal is that an exploding demand for exotic and endangered wildlife (and botanicals) for the legal trade has not led to any corresponding investment in trade regulation and monitoring. CITES receives core funding of just US\$6.2 million annually to facilitate, regulate and monitor the legal, global trade in endangered species.<sup>31</sup> Lack of investment over decades means the CITES trade facilitation and monitoring system is of such poor quality it is easy for illegal products to be laundered into the legal marketplace.<sup>32</sup>

As a result, in 2017 the illegal trade in endangered species was estimated to be worth between US\$91 and US\$258 billion by the World Customs Organization and the UN Environment Program, which stated that this illegal trade is growing at 2 to 3 times the pace of the global economy.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, it has long been accepted that wildlife and timber crime is the fourth largest transnational crime in the world, yet it still not included under the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime.<sup>34</sup> It is hard to find any possible justification why it has not been officially recognised. Instead, the task of putting the brakes on this trafficking juggernaut has been left to conservation organisations, who have been given pocket change to create awareness-raising, education and behaviour change programs in the countries where the demand for these products originates (often termed demand side countries by the conservation sector).<sup>35</sup> All of this means that "demand reduction" is rapidly becoming a part of the conservationists' toolkit, an example of this being Nature Needs More's Rhino horn demand reduction campaign (Breaking The Brand—to stop the demand).<sup>36</sup> But if such campaigns are needed it means that the desire has already been triggered or retriggered. Rather than relying on campaigns to put a metaphorical foot on the brakes of desire, it would be preferable to prevent the demand occurring in the first place.

It should be obvious from both the scale of these problems and how entrenched they are in the existing systems that demand reduction initiatives alone cannot fix the issues of both over-exploitation and the illegal trade. Similarly, the scale of the biodiversity crisis highlights that we don't have the luxury of time to tackle the consumption of wildlife in an ad-hoc way, product-by-product, designer-by-designer, species-by-species; an industry-wide approach is needed. This means not only that the regulatory system is modernised and properly resourced, but also that business finally commits to supply

chain transparency; something it has been saying is a top priority for years but with little real progress.<sup>37</sup> It would also mean that the luxury industry reduces the use of exotic and endangered species when creating products, services and experiences and does not use exotic and endangered species in its advertising to promote luxury lifestyles. Any industry transformation will need to come in part from consumer pressure driving such a change. Tackling consumer desire provided the idea for the title of Nature Needs More's video installation for the Venice exhibition, namely, Extinction: The Vulgarity of Desire.<sup>38</sup>

### **Sustainability and Trade**

It is not the purpose of this article to focus on the sustainable use model or supply chain transparency associated with the legal trade but neither can go unacknowledged given the part they play in biodiversity loss. Today we are told a powerful, convenient story that receives too little scrutiny, a story which promises a win-win-win for economic growth, ecological sustainability and social justice outcomes.<sup>39</sup> Yet it is mathematically impossible to maximise a function for all three variables at once. In practice, there are only two possible options, one option being to maximise one outcome at the expense of the other two (win-lose-lose), or a second option which tries to optimise the overall outcomes by making trade-offs between the three. At present, sustainability is just a convenient story to keep us from questioning the reality of unsustainable, over-exploitation of wildlife and the natural world for trade, including for luxury consumption. Unfortunately, today's story is in the interest of those who profit immensely from the legal trade in exotic and endangered species.

Thanks to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) as of May 2019 we now have the most comprehensive report of the status of biodiversity available. Its Global Assessment Report<sup>40</sup> was based on a systematic review of about 15,000 scientific and government resources and its summary unequivocal: "Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history—and the rate of species extinction is accelerating."<sup>41</sup> Direct exploitation for trade was shown to be the most important driver of decline and extinction risk for marine species and the second most important driver for terrestrial and freshwater species. Further insight of the decline in species can be found in the long-running WWF Living Planet Report.<sup>42</sup> The report, first published in 1998, includes historical population data going back to 1970. The data series shows an alarming decline in this population index in the past 50 years, with an observed decline of close to 60 per cent in population abundance. It is clear that our practices of wildlife exploitation are unsustainable. Conservation bodies and intergovernmental agencies monitoring biodiversity have conclusively shown that sustainable use of flora and fauna has not arrested the rapid decline of species.

Yet this trade continues to grow and grow rapidly. Few people could have known before the pandemic of China's 22,000 legal captive breeding facilities.<sup>43</sup> In this, China is a microcosm of the world, for just as its trade in wild animals and birds runs widely and insufficiently regulated, so the global trade is not only below the radar, there is no radar. With little fanfare South Africa reclassified 33 wild animals as farm animals because the country wants to make commercial breeding and selling easier.<sup>44</sup> These include Giraffe and Zebra used in home decor and apparel. A 2012 report, by the UK Government, "estimated" the legal trade in endangered species to be worth US\$320 billion annually.<sup>45</sup> The core funding to CITES to facilitate this highly lucrative worldwide trade is, on paper, US\$6.2 million. The only contributions businesses make to CITES are the token costs for obtaining export permits and in a small number of instances import permits. Those making most of the profits, importers in wealthy countries, pay nothing in almost all cases. Extensive loopholes in the legal trade system enable the rampant illegal wildlife trade, which has been recently estimated by the World Customs Organisation to be worth as much as US\$258bn, in the region of 80 per cent of the value of the legal trade.<sup>46</sup>

**Figure 2**

US\$6.2 Million annually is insufficient to effectively facilitate and monitor a legal trade of US\$320 billion annually. This mismatch enables the illegal trade to flourish.

Research over the years has confirmed, time and time again, that the legal and illegal trade are so intertwined they are functionally inseparable. This is best explained with an example. 96 per cent of python skins are used in the European fashion market and in 2013 the value of the python skin market was estimated to be over US\$1 billion annually.<sup>47</sup> At the CITES 16<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties in Bangkok in 2013 concerns were tabled by several CITES signatory countries

regarding the conservation impacts of trade on wild snake populations and the need for greater monitoring and transparency.<sup>48</sup> The scale of illegal harvesting is known to be significant; just one seizure of illegal python skins in China in 2016 having an estimated worth of US\$48 Million.<sup>49</sup>



**Figure 3**  
Snakeskin boots, Milan 2019 Image © For the Love of Wildlife Ltd.

Research undertaken as a result of these concerns resulted in the report *Assessment of Python Breeding Farms Supplying the International High-end Leather Industry* which found countries exporting python with a CITES source code C [captively bred] where there was no evidence of farming happening anywhere in the country.<sup>50</sup> Given there has been no investment in modifying the CITES trade monitoring system in the years since, these problems still remain. Any stakeholder that wants to retain the sustainable use model—business, government or conservation—must commit to ensuring that the legal trade is transparent. Without transparency there is no validation of the sustainably use model and any talk of sustainability remains greenwashing when it comes to the legal trade in exotic and endangered species. Currently, if sustainability is considered at all, businesses support voluntary codes of conduct or self-

certification schemes that may enhance the brand but do little to address the real challenge of building sustainable supply chains.

## Manufacturing Desire

Unless consumers of products featuring endangered and exotic species are dedicated and tenacious in their research, it is difficult to realise the negative implications of purchasing. This implicit lack of attention means it is too easy for companies to promote sustainability. As discussed earlier, there is no real proof of any claim of sustainability due to the lack of transparent trade analytics and the inseparability of the legal and illegal trade, which means “greenwashing” is far too easy.

The advertising spend of industries and businesses has for decades produced images of the luxury lifestyles of influencers, of all ages, to fill glossy magazines, news and social media. When these images show how comfortable influencers are wearing endangered or exotic species, this has the effect of desensitising and normalising consumers to this trade. Just one example from baby boomers to millennials includes seeing Anna Wintour, Jennifer Lopez and Rhianna in snakeskin.<sup>51</sup> The negative results for biodiversity of driving up this type of destructive consumption are in the media often enough to demonstrate the need for human behaviour change. Psychological research has shown that people struggle to make rational decisions about the future.<sup>52</sup> Our default mode of reasoning is geared towards the present, towards the satisfaction of current and immediate needs. Future needs are heavily discounted by default, as both research in cognitive psychology and behavioural economics has shown. It is only when we are embedded in social frameworks (such as shared narratives, norms and institutions) that counteract this immediacy that we can moderate this tendency.<sup>53</sup> In the absence of such a supportive narrative framework, all the evidence is that opting out of today’s consumption addiction requires both a secure identity and massive willpower to “not” conform. There is nothing rational about being addicted to buying and in fairness to individuals it is important to acknowledge that this is not an individual disease, it is a manufactured affliction.<sup>54</sup>

Ever since the invention of mass manufacturing producers have struggled with the need to find new consumers or to get existing consumers to buy more. Over the last 100 years this need has supported the evolution of mass market advertising and marketing, including the development of psychological insights into consumption, to improve the techniques to encourage us to buy, and buy more.<sup>55</sup> Today these techniques have been perfected to the point where social media advertising can now be targeted in the moment where people are in a vulnerable state.<sup>56</sup> Over time social status, self-identity and self-worth have been more strongly linked to consumption, to the point of “affluenza,” defined as: “A painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.”<sup>57</sup> Given the legal

trade in endangered wildlife is one of the most lucrative in the world, the adverts and marketing created to drive up the desire to consume have serious implications for a species' ability to survive. Fashion brands, advertising and PR agencies do not question these implications, they just assume that supplies that can be sourced legally are sustainable (or at least acceptable). The negative impacts of advertising driving up desire have mostly been overlooked, as detailed recently in "Badvertising: Advertising's role in climate and ecological degradation."<sup>58</sup> This report discusses how the advertising industry has largely escaped accountability, regarding any potential role the sector plays, directly or indirectly, in causing climate and ecological degradation.

For example, consider the frankly disturbing gown worn by the entertainer Cardi B at the 2019 Met Gala; a single gown was made of 30,000 feathers. And why? In an interview with CNN Style, the fashion commentator Anna Wintour quoted the writer and philosopher Susan Sontag as the inspiration for the 2019 Met Gala theme and her feathered cape. "There's a quote from Sontag's Notes [on Fashion] that says 'Camp is a woman walking around in a dress made of 3 million feathers' so I think I might be taking inspiration from that," Wintour revealed.<sup>59</sup> This focus on feathered designs for the catwalk and red carpet in recent years has de-sensitised and normalised feathers in the eyes of many consumers, so it is no surprise that feathered items are flying out of designer and high street stores. Yet again, the desire for social status, together with the paradox of wanting to belong and differentiate, is linked to unnecessary consumption, with no consideration for the effects on the wildlife exploited.

While the preponderance of feathered garments at the 2019 Met Gala highlights the consequences of what may seem flippant thinking and decision making in retriggering the desire for feathers, other examples show a strategic approach to re-normalise the consumption of previously "taboo" items. The periodical *National Geographic* highlighted the fur industry's strategy to nudge designers and consumers back to fur.<sup>60</sup> At the height of the anti-fur movement, fur auction houses started fighting back by inviting young designers and design students, who "flirted with the material early in their careers" said Julie Maria Iversen of Copenhagen Fur.<sup>61</sup> The goal was to make fur just another fine fabric. Fur, of course, is not a fabric, but a body part.

This investment in nudging and desensitising emerging designers has worked. Again, from the *National Geographic* article "These young designers have helped take the younger consumer on what Iversen calls "the fur journey ... We start with the young consumer buying a fur key ring, then maybe a little later she has more money for a fur bag," she said. "Eventually she buys a full coat." It is "all part of the agenda, to inspire the upcoming generation of women".<sup>62</sup> Research by the University of Copenhagen shows that fur retail values for Germany, the UK, Russia, the USA and China totalled US\$30 billion in 2015. The following year, fur sales in the UK were £162 m,

up 350 per cent from 2011.<sup>63</sup> This growing profitability means not all luxury brands turned their backs on fur as it lost its luxury lustre. Since 2018, several luxury brands, in Europe and North America, have renounced fur, an aspect of trade covered in greater detail in “Mammoth Tusk Beads and Vintage Elephant Skin Bags: Wildlife, Conservation, and Rethinking Ethical Fashion,” co-authored with Catherine Kovesi of the University of Melbourne.<sup>64</sup>

Sadly, this comes a time as a July 2019 report, China’s fur trade and its position in the global fur industry, discusses that the world has underestimated China’s contribution to fur production and consumption.<sup>65</sup> The International Fur Federation’s chief executive confirmed Asia now accounts for 35-40 per cent of fur sales, with South Korea another key market and that trends have shifted away from the high-cost fur coat to affordable, everyday garments with small amounts of fur trim.<sup>66</sup> For now, the industry continues to drive de-sensitising and the normalising of these fur products. Sadly, it is working with a growing number of millennial influencers, such as Kendall Jenner, who appear comfortable linking their personal brands and reputations to such products.<sup>67</sup> Whilst the fur industry has been happy to invest in a 40-year strategic marketing campaign to nudge and win over young designers and new customers, it has not made a similar commitment to improve supply chain transparency and regulation.<sup>68</sup> The risks involved in legal captive breeding, for luxury products, came to the fore when six countries, namely Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Italy and the United States reported the presence of the coronavirus in farmed mink. Denmark is the world’s largest producer of mink fur, with around 1,500 breeders, generating 16 million skins annually; 24 countries around the world still allow mink farming. It is worth contrasting that while Denmark is the largest producer of mink, Copenhagen Fashion Week, Sustainability Action Plan 2020–2022, which was launched in January 2020, does not mention the words “fur,” “animal,” “wildlife” or “CITES.”<sup>69</sup>

This leads to the question, is the omission of fur in the sustainability action plan accidental or deliberate? Given that it is very hard for consumers to find information about the legal trade in exotic and endangered species Nature Needs More has recently launched HowToSpendItEthically.Org a new online magazine to help consumers take a closer look at these issues. The aim of the publication is to help consumers know their purchasing behaviour is helping to protect the natural world and not adding to the extinction crisis. The publication highlights stories on how much businesses are making from wildlife species and botanicals. A key aim of HowToSpendItEthically.Org is to ensure wildlife is factored into the evolving sustainable fashion strategy. A focus will be on the need for transparent supply chains to help consumers make informed purchasing decisions. No one wants to be a blind shopper.



**Figure 4**  
Launch article of HowToSpendItEthically.Org ©Nature Needs More Ltd.

At the extreme end of manufacturing desire, the resulting increase in desire and consumption can lead to the extinction of a species in the wild. Too many consumers of wildlife luxuries are either unthinking or do not care about the destruction of the creatures they consume. They are more focused on the status gained from having something that for most is inaccessible. Sadly, some consumers of wildlife products are “banking on extinction” as they make their purchasing decisions.

### Extinction: the Vulgarity of Desire

A 2018 paper by Bar-On and Milo highlighted the fact that of all the mammals on earth only 4 per cent are wild animals, the rest are livestock (60 per cent) and humans (36 per cent).<sup>70</sup> That same year, at the London Conference on Illegal Wildlife Trade, Prince William commented: “It is heartbreaking to think that by the time my children are in their 20s, elephants, rhinos and tigers might well be extinct in the wild.”<sup>71</sup>

Despite the gravity of this extinction crisis, super-affluent consumers are still drawn to rare wildlife products including those derived from the most iconic species. For example, in the last decade elephants have been illegally killed on an industrial scale, estimated at its peak to be one every 15 minutes.<sup>72</sup> Ivory and elephant skins are much-coveted luxury items in both Asia and the West. Although serious questions arise about the supply chain of elephant body parts, as there is evidence that the increased desire for elephant skin is driving illegal poaching and the skinning of elephants,<sup>73</sup> it is not hard to find products made from elephant skin, including boots, bags, even car interiors, all legally traded.<sup>74</sup> Products made from the body parts of giraffes are also desirable. Despite a documented 40 per cent fall in giraffe populations,<sup>75</sup> the trade in legal giraffe parts is booming in the US;<sup>76</sup> their skins are prized for both home apparel and decor.<sup>77</sup> Giraffes were only listed on CITES Appendix II in 2019, meaning that there was no trade monitoring or restrictions until then.

Even now there is little cause for optimism, the CITES trade monitoring system is full of loopholes and traffickers are adept at exploiting those. To consumers in the US it will look as if nothing has changed.

But what happens when legal wildlife products are not enough to fulfil a need for significance within a peer group? Thankfully, doing something illegal is not for everybody and most people shun it. But that does not change the fact that the pressure to differentiate yourself exists and that often, when a handful of pioneers and early adopters create a new market, others will follow,<sup>78</sup> especially if the suppliers can become extremely rich in the process with minimal risk, which is the case with wildlife trafficking. For example, the last decade's growth in demand for rhino horn means it is worth more than gold or cocaine.<sup>79</sup> It is a high reward, low risk crime for criminal syndicates which already have supply chains in place for the trafficking of people, drugs and guns. They simply add one more illegal "product" to the list. All rhinos are listed on CITES Appendix I, meaning no international trade is allowed, although there are exemptions under CITES for trophy hunting. The five remaining species of rhinoceros are estimated to number 28,000, with the Javan (estimated 72 individuals) and Sumatran (estimated 80 individuals) rhinos on the brink of extinction. Demand for rhino horn was historically for use in Traditional Asian Medicine.<sup>80</sup> After international work to close this trade, the early 1990s ushered in a quiet period with very little poaching, which lasted nearly 20 years. Then, in 2007, today's crisis erupted.

Renewed demand for rhino horn emerged in a new, primarily Vietnamese market in which the proffering of rhino horn – powdered and mixed into water or rice wine – was increasingly used to seal business deals.<sup>81</sup> As a result, poaching grew exponentially for seven years, prompting fears of an imminent demise and serious discussions about extinction in the wild. In addition, whole horns or pieces of horn were also gifted, again to help negotiate business deals. To combat this trend and to urgently reduce demand for rhino horn, Nature Needs More employed techniques from a number of behaviour change models, to conduct interviews with elite men based in Vietnam's largest cities: Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.<sup>82</sup> Those interviewed were affluent enough to buy "genuine" rhino horn should they wish (it is estimated that 90 per cent of what is sold as rhino horn in Viet Nam is fake).<sup>83</sup> The results were illuminating and instrumental in designing rhino horn demand reduction campaigns.

This elite male user group showed no empathy for the rhino nor could they be influenced by messages about the efficacy or otherwise of medical use. When they offer rhino horn to men in their peer group it is purely about signalling power and status. By doing so they are saying: "I am someone that you what to do business with, I am in a powerful position and I have connections." Similarly, law enforcement messages do not work for these men, who stated "I am not worried about prosecution"; they obviously felt they were (and indeed often are) above the law. The interviews also confirmed that this key user group is not interested in campaigns that use media celebrities, saying "They are for kids" and

“Celebrities can be paid to say anything”. When asked instead who they are influenced by, it emerged that they followed the same global male business and political celebrities that businesspeople worldwide follow. The specific names mentioned unprompted included Bill Gates, Barack Obama, Richard Branson, Warren Buffett and Bill Clinton. When asked what would make them stop buying rhino horn, the users identified only two potential reasons: if doing so posed a risk to their reputation – namely status anxiety; or if there were a risk to their health – namely health anxiety.

With this clear information and knowing that these men were not intrinsically motivated to change, demand reduction campaigns were created and published in Viet Nam to trigger behaviour change in this key consumer group.<sup>84</sup> Encouragingly, since the campaign launch in 2014 there has been a steady decline in rhino poaching. But such campaigns are not enough on their own to ensure lasting change. The next step for Nature Needs More was to understand how, once a change in purchasing behaviour had been triggered, could such behaviour change be consolidated and maintained over the long-term. This means the final step in any demand reduction campaign is knowing how to redirect desire away from endangered wildlife, legal or illegal. We need to find another way for consumers to fulfil their motivation for status in a non-destructive way.



**Figures 5 and 6**  
Examples of Breaking the Brand Rhino Campaign.  
Image © Nature Needs More Ltd.

Knowing that many users of illegal wildlife products gain status, influence, power and/or prestige with their peer group by consuming these rare products or by gifting them, reducing the desire for say, rhino horn risks accelerating demand for another endangered wildlife product which takes its place. For example, as demand reduction

campaigns in recent years have focused on tackling the desire for rhino horn and elephant ivory, resulting in both being seen as less favourable, the substitute for these rare products maybe the ‘red ivory’ of the helmeted hornbill, given an explosion in demand has been seen in recent years.<sup>85</sup> It must be noted that it is not possible to simply redirect these consumers back towards mainstream, manufactured luxury products which would likely be perceived as a backward step by the elite users of wildlife products. Users of rhino horn are already engaged in all forms of mainstream legal luxury consumption, including legal, rare wildlife products. It is illegal luxury consumption which served, in their minds, to differentiate them from the broader elite group. For this exclusive group of consumers, a status driven motivation is needed to persuade them to stop consuming products from an increasingly endangered natural world.

In 2015, a visit to the “What is Luxury?” Exhibition at London’s Victoria & Albert Museum introduced Nature Needs More to the concepts of Magnificence and Magnificence versus Luxury, as discussed in the work of the historian Catherine Kovesi.<sup>86</sup> Nature Needs More started to explore whether the historic concept of magnificence might provide the necessary insights to redirect wealthy individuals to gain status from contributing to wildlife and the natural world, rather than consuming it.

## Magnificence vs. Luxury: Status from Contribution

Luxury today is entirely linked to the consumption of high-status goods, services and experiences. This was not always the case, however. Before luxury consumption became socially acceptable, it was perceived as vulgar and self-serving rather than status-gaining. Status was gained from Magnificence, a concept steeped in history that the Italian humanist Giovanni Pontano called the “fruit” of wealth. Magnificence was



**Figure 7**

considered a moral framework that obliged the elites to spend part of their wealth on something that was of value to the greater good.<sup>87</sup>

As being a member of the elite was largely an accident of birth, the obligation was strong and seen as part of maintaining the system. Historically, it involved erecting public buildings such as cathedrals, libraries, universities (and later museums and art galleries) or



**Figure 8**  
Defining Luxury (the historic words used to describe Luxury).

the financing of “public good” endeavours, such as the upkeep of an army to protect the city or nation.<sup>88</sup>

By contrast, self-made, newly rich merchants in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were observed to demonstrate no such obligation. At this point in history, they had the money, but not the status. Seen from the beginning as the aspirational consumption of the non-elites, luxury was considered a vice, not a virtue; associated with immorality, envy and lust and hence deemed improper. Those who pursued a life of personal luxury were considered pale imitations of elites. Such lifestyles were seen as extravagant, decadent and practised by the mediocre and those with vain ambition. This led to a clash of values which went so far as to prevent the newly rich from wearing certain clothes that they could afford to buy, but that were “reserved” for the real elites—those who had inherited their position.<sup>89</sup>

This overwhelmingly hostile view of luxury slowly disappeared from the late 16th to 18th centuries, as the class of wealthy merchants and business owners continued to grow and the language of magnificence was subverted to now describe luxury. The public perception of luxury followed suit and today we nearly universally aspire to and worship luxury consumption, magnificence has been all but forgotten. Billions of dollars go into telling us that we need lifestyles

filled with luxury goods, experiences and services if we wish to be seen as successful in the social comparison stakes.

So, if we were to reinvent Magnificence for a modern world, what form might it take and how might it convey status to the elites? Today, wildlife and the natural world are bereft of magnificence, with only 3 per cent of non-government donations going to the environment and animals,<sup>90</sup> and an even smaller percentage to wild animals and pristine nature. By creating a new narrative about re-investing in conservation and the natural world as a way to demonstrate status and prestige, can we provide these elites with an alternative means to fulfil their self-image needs, and a way for them to continue to ‘win’ in the social comparison stakes? Of course, charitable giving is already linked to status and prestige, in the main associated with a narrow focus “suitable causes” rather than a visionary approach to support rehabilitating the natural world. There is now a growing scepticism about elite giving, sometimes termed “haute philanthropy”. These concerns are outlined by Paul Vallely in his recent book *Philanthropy: From Aristotle to Zuckerberg*, in which he writes: “A lot of elite philanthropy is about elite causes. Rather than making the world a better place, it largely reinforces the world as it is. Philanthropy very often favours the rich—and no one holds philanthropists to account for it.”<sup>91</sup> This is not Magnificence as defined by Nature Needs More.

To understand better the motivations of those who have chosen to contribute and how their direct involvement in such philanthropic projects makes them feel about themselves and changes their personal identity, Nature Needs More conducted 17 interviews with wealthy Western businessmen aged between 35 and 75, whose personal wealth ranges from multi-millions to billions, and who are contributing to conservation and/or the public good.<sup>92</sup>

Over 50 per cent of those interviewed were actively participating in the projects they were supporting financially and those more focused on donations gave a significant amount, up to 25 per cent of their annual incomes. All but one were achievement-focused but only half of the interviewees had a clear sense of purpose. Those with a clarity of purpose were, in the main, actively participating in their cause, not just donating money. All interviewees were comfortable with complexity and all most all had high levels of risk tolerance. The business owners expressed that they had grown beyond their business and felt that they had nothing left to prove in a business context. All of them had grown beyond what would be termed “mainstream” professional lives.

Some of the underlying motivations to contribute appeared to be related to ensuring cognitive ability did not atrophy or go to waste, and being able to use those skills in a more complex environment. For some this was primarily about demonstrating to themselves that they had “still got it”. For others, this seemed more about competition – being seen to be a thought leader in a peer group or being able to pilot innovative approaches that others were likely to follow. In addition, some wanted to demonstrate that they still had the ability

to innovate (solving problems others cannot) but didn't see opportunities for showing this in a business context. By focusing on solving complex issues in the public sphere they saw a chance to shift this competition into a new, larger arena. Another motivation to contribute was related to the perceived opportunity to network with people they "look up to or found interesting" and getting involved in contributing and donating was seen as an entry ticket to a more exclusive circle. This group appeared to look for a return on their investment, through making connections and getting access to a higher status group as a way of maintaining significance and relevance they were still craving. But there was little evidence that interviewees were simply using this context to network to further build their wealth or develop new business opportunities.

Two clear patterns emerged from these interviews, the first that solving complex (global) problems is the new status-enhancing activity for this group of men:

Some of the smartest people in the business/political/philanthropic world [elite or cognitive elite] are thinking about these issues. If it means I have to give a \$100,000 donation at the end of an invitation-only function where I have been a part of and stimulated by complex conversations I'm fine with that, it's a great network to be a part of.

The second pattern was that they do not want repetition and boredom. When asked "As of tomorrow, if you had to give this all up and solely focus on your business or more mainstream professional activities, how would you feel about that?" four interviewees, all men aged in their fifties and sixties, used similar terms to describe their feelings: "I would be completely deflated ... quite suffocated"; "incredibly stifled"; "quickly bored and frustrated," and "demoralised." An observed third theme was that self-image was not defined by luxury consumption or displays of luxury: "Years ago I wore a Rolex, now the watch I wear cost me \$20." Though some meetings were conducted in offices filled with expensive artworks, the interviewees appeared impervious to their surroundings.

The sample group for this set of interviews is too small to draw concrete conclusions about shifting more of the super-affluent from consumption to contribution. There is a key caveat that must be considered when researching these patterns. The new form of magnificence cannot be based on empathy or compassion with wildlife or nature. Historically, magnificence was based on status and implied obligation, and the link between the two was broadly accepted by the population at large. Anything based solely on compassion with nature cannot be broadly accepted as yet, particularly as we are still in the process of increasing our distance from nature through continuing urbanisation. For now, the emerging narrative needs to be about investment in solving the most complex of problems – preventing a planetary catastrophe.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

There is ample evidence that wildlife populations are plummeting and trade is a major cause. Given the rarity value of most endangered species, much of this trade is in the luxury sector. With massive profit margins, huge investments are made in driving up desire through advertising, marketing, celebrity and social influencer endorsements.

From a consumer perspective, the trade is completely opaque. There has been zero investment in transparency and minimal investment in maintaining a 1970s monitoring system. In theory we could educate consumers about the implications of their purchasing decisions for endangered species, which is the purpose of HowToSpendIt Ethically.Org, but in practice lack of transparency in the current system means consumers cannot make informed purchasing decisions for products, services and experiences linked to exotic and endangered species. Industry and business compound this by lobbying for less transparency under the guise of 'commercial in confidence'.

It is left to underfunded conservation NGOs to battle the overall trend of ever-increasing biomass extraction and to tackle fashion fads like rhino horn consumption that can wipe out a species in just a few years. To date, donors only make funds available to fight the consumption of illegal products, but the legal trade is so intertwined with the illegal trade that they are functionally inseparable. This illegal trade cannot be decisively tackled until the system that facilitates and monitors the legal trade is modernised and appropriately resourced. Without this transparency, there is no proof of sustainability and most of what is claimed is "greenwashing".

Highly targeted demand reduction campaigns can make a difference when the upfront research is done to understand consumer motivations to consume and to stop consuming, but this only works on a product-by-product and target group-by-target group basis. Given the clearly demonstrated scale of the extinction crisis, and knowing direct exploitation for trade is a significant contributor, we do not have the luxury of time to create demand reduction campaigns for each and every consumer of each and every endangered species. A systemic approach is needed, the starting point being genuine radical transparency in supply chains using exotic and endangered species. So far there is little pressure on industry for them to make such a commitment.

In parallel, we need more pioneers who see the benefit of deriving status from contributing and protecting nature, not from consuming it. Luxury consumption is about status and social differentiation. But there is no real reason for status needs to be derived from consumption other than helping companies maintain their profits. Status can be equally be derived from contribution. We need to find a new way of supporting those who have already made the change and those wanting to make changes. Researching magnificence can inform the creation of this narrative and provide historical guidance on how to create a self-sustaining system of status competition from contribution to the natural world.

## Disclosure statement

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