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Fish Leather in Fashion



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

APR 27, 2023 [fish leather](#), [leather alternatives](#)



Leather has a tremendous environmental impact, not to mention the ethical concerns surrounding animal agriculture. But it's hard to replace this durable and versatile material – just try shopping for a pair of vegan work boots. Unfortunately, “vegan leather” is usually just a euphemism for “plastic.” Many [leather alternatives](#) cause the same environmental problems as other [synthetic fabrics](#). Recently, options for [plant-based leathers](#) have increased. But one surprisingly old option is starting to draw new attention – fish leather.

What Is Fish Leather?

Like other leathers, fish leather is the [tanned](#) skin of animals, in this case, fish. Fish leather can be made from the skins of a wide variety of marine and freshwater species: tuna, shark, salmon, carp, stingray, cod, sea wolf, sturgeon, and even [tilapia](#) and catfish. It usually has a scaly structure and is often prized for its

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interesting texture. Fish skins are usually smaller and ^{CLOSE}ner than calfskin, requiring fewer chemicals and less energy to tan. But it may be relatively stronger due to the crisscrossing structure of the fibers in fish skin that make it more elastic and tear-resistant than cowhide.

Fish leather has a long but poorly recorded [history](#), largely because it was [associated with poverty](#). Indigenous people in northern latitudes all around the world have used fish leather for a variety of purposes, including coats, mittens, and clothing. Medieval Icelanders, who had access to a lot more fish than livestock, made boots from fish skin. (Currently, Nordic shoe company Woden makes a [salmon skin sneaker](#).) Fish leather continued to be common until the Industrial Revolution led to greater assimilation of Indigenous peoples and the proliferation of cheaper leather goods. Today, the association between fish leather and poverty is being turned on its head as luxury brands like Prada and Dior have begun [incorporating fish leather](#) into their products.



Tanned and dyed fish skins.

Pros and Cons of Fish Leather

First, the caveats. [Fish leather](#), obviously, is not vegan. However, for many people, fish do not spark the same ethical concerns as mammals. The environmental performance of fish leather depends on the species, the harvesting method, and the tanning process. Rising [ocean temperatures](#) and [overharvesting](#) are destroying marine ecosystems and depleting fish populations. Many threatened or endangered [shark species](#) that are due for protection could experience new pressures if the demand for [shark leather](#) increases. (Note that the material sold as sharkskin is not leather; it is a stiff, slightly shiny, woven fabric, usually made from synthetic fibers.)

Most leather utilizes [waste from beef production](#), which is among the most carbon-intensive forms of agriculture. Grazing operations and [CAFOs](#) also contribute to [deforestation](#) and [desertification](#). Producers of fish leather commercially available today often source their fish skins from sustainable fisheries or land-based fish farms, and sometimes even restaurant waste. Although some use standard tanning methods, vegetable tanning is a common choice.

Shopping for Fish Leather

Today, companies around the world are rediscovering fish leather. Global brands are sourcing sustainably fished leathers from tanneries like [Atlantic Leather](#) or even restaurant waste from French tannery [lctyos](#). Smaller companies are often reviving traditional tanning processes and benefiting marginalized communities with their fish leather.



Wallet made of burbot skin from Finnish company [Kalaparkki](#)

Kalaparkki

[Kalaparkki](#) is a small Finnish company. Founded by a single craftsman in 2007, it uses mostly vegetable-tanned salmon and burbot skins. Kalaparkki sells wallets, bags, and purses, as well as specialty items like hip flasks, and the leather material itself.



Pirarucu leather shoulder bag from [Piper & Skye](#)

Pirarucu

Unlike most fish used for leather, [pirarucu](#) can provide skins as large as cow hides. The largest freshwater fish in the world, pirarucu is from the Amazon Basin and routinely reaches up to two meters in length and 100 kg in weight but can be much larger. It has been subject to commercial fishing for half a century, but in the last two decades, Brazil has adopted a [more sustainable management program](#) for pirarucu fisheries. Local communities are now involved in managing and monitoring their resources. The skins, once a discarded waste product, are now tanned domestically and exported. Companies like [Piper & Skye](#) and numerous [artisans on Etsy](#) manufacture them into luxury leather products.



P448's recycled leather sneaker has lionfish leather heel tabs.

Inversa

Founded by three scuba divers in Florida, [Inversa](#) makes three kinds of leather using a twist on the concept of [regenerative agriculture](#). All of its leathers use the skins of [invasive species](#) that are damaging their local ecosystems. Two of Inversa's leathers are made from fish – lionfish and dragonfin – while the third is python. Rather than marketing specific products, Inversa's [business model](#) is strictly as a sustainable leather producer. They source their skins from fishing cooperatives in mostly impoverished communities throughout the unnatural range of the lionfish. Then they tan and dye the hides, which they sell to partner companies like [Teton Leather Co.](#) and [Italian company P448](#) to fashion into sneakers and high-end accessories.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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