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Shopping with compassion

12th April 2006

Everyone knows that animal testing for cosmetics stopped a long time ago - or did it? Christine Lee of World Animal Day has been finding out.

"On October 4 (World Animal Day) animal welfare campaigning organisation Naturewatch launched the 10th edition of its Compassionate Shopping Guide, a reference book detailing which cosmetics, toiletries and household products have and have not been tested on animals.

The Guide was first launched in 1993, as a 30-page booklet, by Naturewatch Director John Ruane, who describes it as starting off as a 'bit of a kitchen table operation'. Producing the Guide was a gamble as John was advised by lawyers that, should court action be taken by any of the listed testing companies, he would not even afford to be able to get to court and Naturewatch would cease to exist! Nevertheless, John decided the risk was one worth taking - but the Guide has certainly upset the apple-cart for certain companies over the years.

Naturewatch began by looking very closely at existing concepts of 'cruelty-free', in particular the 'five-year rolling rule', whereby companies guarantee not to use any ingredient that has been animal-tested within the last five years - a policy that was being strongly promoted at the time by other organisations and by the Body Shop.

Since this policy meant that in 1993 a company would not use an ingredient tested in 1988, but by 1994 this ingredient would somehow become acceptable, Naturewatch decided that the five-year rolling rule did nothing to discourage animal testing. This meant that Naturewatch was the



Shopping Guide Editor Dawn Lewis shows off her handiwork.

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only animal welfare group that did not endorse the Body Shop.

Naturewatch insisted that the fixed cut-off date, now used by other organisations and rapidly becoming accepted as an industry standard for assessing testing policies, is the only acceptable criterion for assessing a company's cruelty-free policy. The harsh fact is that virtually any ingredient used in cosmetics or toiletries will have been tested on animals at some point in its development. But a company can adopt a fixed cut-off date, thus guaranteeing that neither they nor their suppliers will use any ingredient tested on animals after this date. In essence, the older the fixed cut-off date, the more ethical the company. (It should be pointed out that Body Shop have since adopted a fixed cut-off date policy of 1990.)

Legislation and loopholes

But is it really necessary in this day and age to have such publications? The UK adopted a voluntary ban on the testing of cosmetics in 1998, but testing still goes on in Europe, Japan, the USA and many other places. And of course with the growing tendency towards big multinational corporations buying out smaller manufacturers, there is the additional ethical dilemma posed by small companies that do not test on animals having their profits ploughed into larger organisations that do test.

According to EU Dangerous Substances Directive, new substances have to be tested on animals, but of course this begs the question whether we do actually need a new mascara, a new skin cream or a new shower gel. Common sense provides the obvious answer to this. However, common sense is one of the first casualties in an industry that is dominated by a handful of giant multinationals, each fighting for a larger market share and each investing large amounts of money in research and development.

For example, according to Naturewatch L'Oréal has registered an astonishing 1,400 new formulations in the space of just three years. And of course these huge companies have vast advertising budgets meaning that they can afford to prey on human paranoias about ageing, about being unattractive, about being unloved. And in the mean time mice, guinea pigs, rabbits, rats and fish continue to be used to assess skin and eye irritation, system toxicity and carcinogenicity.

Nevertheless, there does seem to be some hope on the horizon. In 2003 there was announced an amendment to the European Cosmetics Directive whereby a ban on animal testing for cosmetics ingredients would be phased in from 2009 where alternatives exist, culminating in a total ban in 2013. This was greeted with dismay by many cosmetics companies, and in September 2003 some 70 cosmetics ingredients manufacturers presented a legal challenge in the European Court of Justice; to date there has been no ruling on this challenge.

Unfortunately there are always the inevitable loopholes. Dawn Lewis, the Shopping Guide's current editor explains: "Though the European Cosmetics Directive offers hope, the ban only applies to tests conducted for the purpose of developing a new cosmetic product. Substances tested on animals under the Dangerous Substances Directive or REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals) legislation, would continue - potentially providing a loophole which formulators could then exploit. Moreover, unlike with cosmetics testing, where there is legislative pressure for the development of alternatives, no such pressure exists to ban the testing of household products."

So for the moment, the Compassionate Shopping Guide will remain essential to the ethical shopper. It would be good to think, however, that one day the need for such publications will cease to exist and that, to quote the Guide's cover girl Twiggy, "The way ahead is cruelty-free".


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