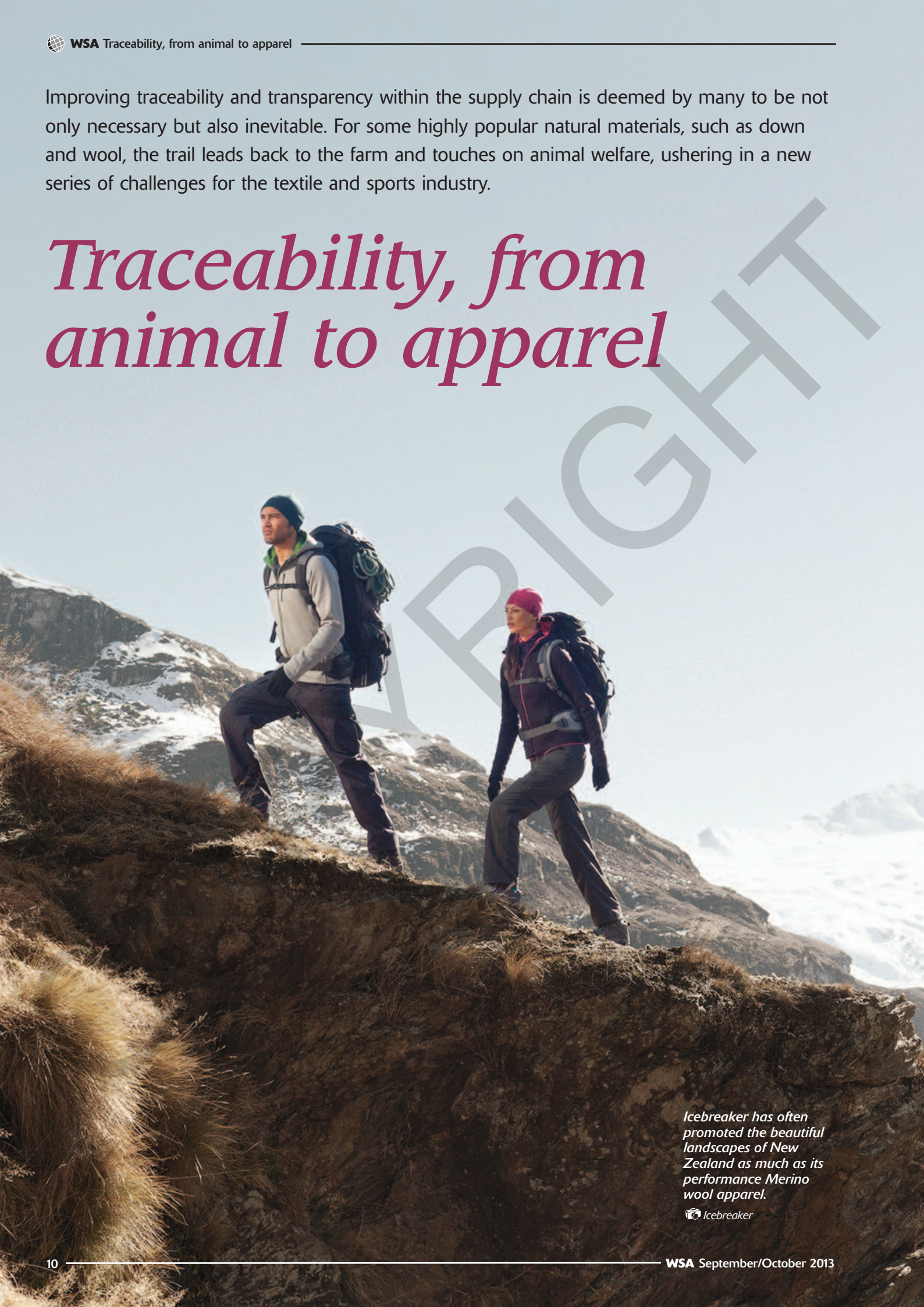
Improving traceability and transparency within the supply chain is deemed by many to be not only necessary but also inevitable. For some highly popular natural materials, such as down and wool, the trail leads back to the farm and touches on animal welfare, ushering in a new series of challenges for the textile and sports industry.

Traceability, from animal to apparel

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Icebreaker has often promoted the beautiful landscapes of New Zealand as much as its performance Merino wool apparel.

Icebreaker

Tracing the textile supply chain is a challenge in itself, with the diverse selection of materials, components and processes needed to assemble a finished garment. Now take that convoluted chain of events and add another link, animal husbandry: how animals are bred, fed, cared for, what treatments they undergo, and how they are killed to become food, if that is their lot. This additional stage of transformation in the textile chain applies to wool and down as well as leather, cashmere and silk. The surge in popularity of the first two natural materials stoked animal rights organisations campaigns, forcing brands to review their supply chains all the way back to the "cradle": the lambs and chicks of duck and geese. Though duck down makes up the greater part of down used in outerwear and bedding, it is the plight of geese that drew the most attention.

Patagonia discovered this in 2010, when Four Paws (Vier Pfoten), a German animal rights organisation accused the company of using down from grey geese, raised for foie gras in Hungary, which were force-fed, to fatten the liver, and live-plucked. "We had been told previously that geese force-fed for foie gras produce an oily, second-quality down that would not be supplied to us," the company declared in its official down supply chain statement released in January 2013. This turned out to be incorrect: the quality of down is the same, and once washed and processed, it is practically impossible to determine whether it was harvested from a living or dead animal. The situation does not seem to apply to ducks, raised for their meat, not liver, and whose feathers and down are collected after slaughtering.

Patagonia set about finding a solution to the problem, hiring a traceability expert, Rachelle Johnson, and, after her two to three-year investigation, moved its goose down sourcing from Hungary to Poland, where animal welfare is said to be "good, with a low risk of live-plucking and force-feeding occurring".

In the meantime, as ethics and traceability issues continue to gain momentum, the Outdoor Industry Association, the European Outdoor Group and the Textile Exchange (formerly the Organic Exchange) set up a Down Task Force in 2012 as part of the Materials Traceability Working Group (MTWG), which also oversees a Wool Task Force. A document, to be released at the end of 2013, is in the process of being drafted and may contribute to a future international standard for down. In a position paper dated March 18, 2013, Four Paws continued to demand a clear ban on any removal of feathers and down from live animals.

Many sportswear brands have taken measures to certify the provenance of the goose and duck down used in their products. Haglöfs, in Sweden, has asked its suppliers to provide written assurances of the absence of live plucking and has sent personnel to check the facilities. For each down garment, a unique ID number traces the raw material back to the slaughterhouse. But, as seen at Patagonia, these certificates are not fail-safe guarantees.



"We carefully select our suppliers to ensure that our mission as a company is aligned with our suppliers' ways of working," says Wendy Savage, Patagonia's social and environmental responsibility manager. The Ultra Light Down Hoody range is now sourced from non live-plucked geese and duck down.

Patagonia

Both Haglöfs and Patagonia, as would be expected, apply the same principles to their merino wool supply chains. The Swedish company relies on ZQ Merino "guaranteed 100% mulesing free", while the US company has, among other developments, begun sourcing its wool from Patagonia, in Argentina, for socks, baselayer products and a few sweaters. The move, made with the support of the Nature Conservancy, is part of a mission to reduce over-grazing in a region that is close to its heart. Patagonian "wool is more expensive than commodity wool," says Patagonia's sustainability director Jill Dumain, who awaits the market's reaction this fall to see how far the brand can go.

Action & reaction

Most of the merino wool used in sportswear is sourced in Australia, the world's leading wool producer, and the country where flystrike is most common. Here again, animal rights organisations have stridently voiced their concerns regarding mulesing, a procedure in which the skin around the buttock of merino sheep is removed to reduce the attack of the parasite. Campaign groups fiercely condemn the practice, and have done since 1988 at least.

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A Swiss German brand launched in the A/W 12/13 season, Super.Natural is bluesign certified and sources its fully traceable wool in Australia.

super.natural

Faced with the threat of boycotts, Australian Wool Innovation (AWI), an industry association controlled by 25,000 Australian woolgrowers, had pledged to phase out mulesing by 2010, investing $45 million in animal health and welfare research and development, of which $26 million was said to be allocated to flystrike prevention. These efforts have not put an end to the process as seen in recent data from the Australian Wool Exchange (AWEX), indicating that 90% of Australian wool still comes from mulesed sheep, and only 14% of the lambs receive pain relief, according to ABC Rural, an Australian news organisation. In a 2008 statement, AWI claimed that 11% of Australian growers had phased out mulesing in 2005 and 23% in 2008. At the time of going to press, updated figures from AWI were unavailable.

Research conducted by AWI has focused on finding less painful ways to protect lambs, such as using liquid nitrogen or lasers to remove the excess skin from the animal's "breech" area, two techniques used for cosmetic surgery on humans. Liquid nitrogen freezes the treated area reducing wrinkling and tightening the surrounding skin. Lasers also remove unwanted hair and skin. Breeding plain-bodied sheep, which would no longer need any form of surgical mulesing, is another option being studied by the Cooperative Research Centre for Sheep Industry Innovation (Sheep CRC), an initiative set up in 2007.

Gostwyck, a small Australian woolgrower with high ambitions regarding environmental protection, animal welfare and wool quality, supports the breeding of plain-bodied sheep, and has been reducing the presence of wrinkly sheep in its flock. The grower stopped mulesing lambs in 2005, in addition to introducing a series of environmentally sound practices. Flock rotation, now done twice a week, also helps reduce the incidence of flystrike. "In addition to reducing over-grazing, the high rotation rate also helps avoid 'sheep camps', where the animals huddle at night and faeces accumulate," says Philip Attard, who, with his wife Alison, a fifth-generation member of the family-owned farm, manages roughly 18,000 sheep producing 55 to 65 tonnes of super fine and ultrafine merino per year.

The result of a diverse series of efforts, which goes from cultivating grass to 12 years of selective breeding, is that Gostwyck produces cashmere-grade merino, measuring on average 16 microns, with some sheep producing 12 and 13-micron fibres. "Our merino is itch-free, mules-free, machine-washable, environmentally sound and sold at the right price," says Mr Attard, who believes this meets five issues that are essential to consumers. But to reach the consumer, Gostwyck cannot go through the auction process, where wool from all suppliers is usually blended. The grower therefore works with a single spinner, Novetex, to provide fully traceable 100% Gostwyck Merino wool.

The happy sheep of New Zealand

The issue of mulesing, which remains problematic in Australia, is much less so in New Zealand. The majority of farms, or stations as they are called, within the New Zealand Merino (NZM) trade organisation have ceased the practice, and it is strictly prohibited on ZQ-certified farms, a label formerly called Zque, which guarantees traceability and contract prices for growers.

On the premise that irreproachable animal husbandry produces higher-quality wool, NZM is currently looking to



Ortovox's Rock'n'wool range is made with wool grown in Tasmania, regarded as the part of Australia where the air is the purist, and animal welfare of a high standard. The colourful range is made in a blend of 18-micron merino wool (50%), Tencel (30%) and polyester (20%).

Ortovox

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measure and monitor the happiness of the country's sheep. "Typically, when the sheep suffers stress, this will translate to weak points in the merino wool. This significantly reduces the fibre's economic value, so is something to be avoided," says NZM manager for innovation and sustainability Dave Maslen. "With more and more 'Merino' in the market, ZQ Merino helps distinguish the best," adds Gretchen Foster, NZM's general manager for marketing. SmartWool, Ibex, Designer Textiles International and Rewoolution are some of the brands that adhere to the third-party-audited ZQ standards. Icebreaker also buys ZQ Merino wool, a criteria that is a part of the brand's own traceability programme known as Baacode.

"Farmers are by and large environmentally-conscious," says Designer Textiles International CEO Malcolm Walkinshaw, adding that ZQ certification goes further than others as it also covers sheep dog welfare. Italian brand Rewoolution also stands by its wool certified "from sheep to shop", a ZQ Merino slogan. One of the few vertically integrated companies in the merino wool business, Rewoolution products are knitted with 17.7-micron ZQ Merino spun by Reda in Biella, Rewoolution's parent company.

Icebreaker, founded by Jeremy Moon in 1994, claims to have been the first outdoor apparel company to source merino directly from growers, a process it began in 1997. Traceability was taken one step further with the launch of Baacode, in 2008, which shows consumers a few of the stages of the brand's supply chain, but does not reveal the names of the companies it works with. Widely credited as the brand that reintroduced merino wool in sportswear, Icebreaker now 'baacodes' close to 80% of its collections, corresponding roughly to 13 million garments.

The New-Zealand company is also a member of the Sustainable Apparel Coalition and therefore works with the Higg Index, which seeks to measure the impact of materials used in the sports industry. One of the elements of this complex programme, the Materials Sustainability Index (MSI) specifically traces raw materials from "cradle to gate": from their origins to the finished textile or component part that is ready to be shipped to a product manufacturing facility. The online MSI database currently gives wool a score of 18.8 and down 37.5, which makes down one of the 'best' materials on the 50-point scale. For both materials, the scoring system starts at the farm, the cradle, but does not cover animal welfare parameters. That level of transparency is "particularly challenging and full of assumptions, since animals are raised in such a wide variety of ways," says Coalition public relations manager Tim Gnatek. The index may in time integrate additional criteria. Bluesign, in response to a question on the same issue, says the label does not cover farming conditions either. Both certification programmes are better armed for synthetics, which make up the greater proportion of sports apparel and shoes.

Yet many signs point to the spread of empathy with living species in society at large, and animal rights activists know how to make full use of the possibilities offered by the internet and social networking sites to voice their accusations. In the UK, in 2011, boycotts in travel, clothing and food exceeded £2.5 billion, says "The Better Consumer in Europe", a report published in March 2013 by sustainability consultancy texSture, citing a 2012 study by the Cooperative Bank. For sports brands, whose high visibility makes them any easy target, it will be increasingly difficult to ignore calls for transparent supply chains, all the way back to the farm.



Australian grower Gostwyck phased out mulesing in 2005 and produces what the company calls cashmere-grade merino wool measuring on average 16 microns.

Gostwyck



Since 1963, Ermenegildo Zegna rewards the finest wool fibres, measuring 15.5 microns and less, produced by Australian woolgrowers. The upmarket Italian brand buys all the wool that competes in the Vellus Aureum (Golden Fleece) contest.

Zegna & AWI

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