

# How We Shut Down Djurfront, Sweden's Falkenberg Mink Farm

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## Sweden and the fur

In Sweden the fur industry mainly consists of mink farms, where about 442 500 minks were raised just to be killed in 2019. In the last twenty years, the number of mink farms in Sweden has declined sharply. Currently there are about 20 mink farms left. In addition to mink farms, there are rabbit breeders who raise a small number of rabbits primarily for fur production together with meat production.

Historically, there was also fox and chinchilla farms for fur production in Sweden, but fortunately the last fox farm closed in 2001 and the last chinchilla farm in 2014. At that time, the Swedish animal rights organisation Djurrättsalliansen managed to save the lives of the 243 chinchillas that were left on the farm and relocate them to loving homes. There is no ethical ban on fox and chinchilla farms but what instead caused the farms to close was regulatory changes regarding how the animals were allowed to be kept. For example, foxes must be allowed to dig and be together with other foxes on large areas, and this is simply not profitable and therefore the farms were dismantled after the new requirements were introduced.

Similar regulatory changes that would mean the end of mink farms in Sweden have been discussed for several years but have unfortunately not been introduced. Sweden has for almost thirty years had an animal welfare law which says that animals should be “maintained and cared for in a good animal environment so that they get to embrace their natural behavior”. At the same time, mink farming looks basically the same today as it did at its beginning in the 1930’s. The mink farms being or not being has become a long-standing political accompaniment, not least in recent years when it has become an issue of terrorizing of farmers. It has, as always, not been a debate about the animals but rather about the farmers, income and earnings.

Several institutions, including the Swedish Veterinary Medicine Society, the Agriculture Agency and the Animal Welfare Authority, have over the years raised their voices about the fact that the mink farms do not comply with section 4 of the animal welfare law.

It is the paragraph that deals with natural behavior and good animal environment. Regarding the mink farms, development has unfortunately been slower than that of the fox and chinchilla farms. The mink farms are significantly larger in number than the fox farms were and stopping the mink farm by means of stricter rules has proved to be easier said than done. Not surprisingly, economic interests have taken precedence over ethical values.

In the run-up to the 2002 elections, the Social Democrats, the Environmental Party and the Left Party promised that if they came to power, they would work for the abolition of the fur industry. A state investigation was carried out to determine how the settlement would proceed. In addition to tightening animal welfare rules, the possibility of imposing a total ban on fur farming was entirely considered on ethical grounds. The investigation was presented in 2003 and recommended tougher rules.

This led to a draft law presented in 2005 which meant that a new paragraph would be introduced in the fourth paragraph which would only apply to minks. Minks would be given the right to climb, move, be alone, hunt and swim. In the spring of 2006, the proposal was sent to the European Union for reference. France opposed the proposal, and even though Sweden won in the end, the process drew out of time. The proposal could not be taken up in Parliament before the elections, which would have been a prerequisite for the then government to live up to its election promises. Instead, Sweden received a bourgeois government, and the bill was rejected in December 2006.

Also in 2011 and 2012 the proposal from the left side came up for a vote in Parliament, but was voted down. Instead, the government commissioned the Agriculture Agency to formulate new requirements for mink farming that did not impose such far-reaching requirements so that the industry would become unprofitable and needed to be abolished. The new regulations of the Agriculture Agency from 2012 mean a number of very marginal differences for animals from previous regulations. Among other things, the minks are required to have a small toy, e.g. a plastic tube, in the minimum cage. The new regulations also mean that so-called floor levels will be used in the cages, which means that a small extra cage is placed on top of the original cage. That gives the minks a few extra centimeters of space.

At the end of January 2021 the government, together with the Swedish Agriculture Agency and the State Veterinary Institute, announced that a ban on mink breeding will be introduced in Sweden in 2021. The decision was taken due to the pandemic, when the coronavirus was detected on 23 out of 26 Swedish mink farms. During 2021 no new minks were allowed to be bred, which is something that is done on farms annually in normal cases, but despite the ban the farmers could keep the breeding animals. In 2023 it was announced that the government proposes to allocate a total of SEK 180 million in 2024 and 2025 to support those entrepreneurs who voluntarily liquidate their mink farming for fur production.

The aid is intended to be paid to companies after liquidation in the period 2024-2025. It is not, therefore, a ban on mink farms for the sake of the animals, but rather to attract farmers with money because they cost too much to keep.

The struggle for the Minks has therefore been going on for many years and continues to this day. Opinion polls have repeatedly shown that a large majority of the Swedish people are against fur farming. Again and again, however, economic interests have gone before the animals, and politicians have repeatedly betrayed the animals.

## **The mink**

The minks within the fur industry live their entire lives in mesh cages. The cages are set up close to each other in long rows. The Swedish cages are normally the size of an open-ended evening newspaper, with a small box as a bucket. A territory in the wild is usually between a half and six kilometers long and always stretches along the water.

The adult minks that is used in breeding live alone in their cages, because otherwise they would fight with each other. After the annual mating season, an average of five pups are born. They are allowed to stay in their mother's cage until they are about eight weeks old and are then placed in pairs, usually a female and a male, in their own cages. In the wild, the mink lives in solitude, completely alone, and claims its own territories. They only socialize with others during mating season and the young's first twelve weeks of life.

The minks are fed once or twice a day at the farms. The food is a kind of mash with products from the meat and fishery industry, which is placed on the roof of the cage so that the minks can lick it. Minks are natural predators that in the wild hunt rodents, fish, crustaceans and birds. Even larger animals such as rabbits and cats have been killed by minks. A large part of the hunting takes place in water and minks are therefore highly skilled at diving and swimming. They are adapted for life both on land and in water and are therefore referred to as semi-aquatic, as evidenced by the fact that they have some swimming skin between the toes. The fur industry often claims that the minks that are kept on Swedish mink farms have been bred to thrive in the cage environment.

This claim lacks evidence. Instead, research shows that farmed minks' behaviors and needs largely overlap with the wild minks. There are no species that by breeding have started to thrive in cages. Small changes to the cages, such as putting in toys or shelves, have not been shown to make enough difference when the minks are still sitting in these extremely small and dull cages. However, stereotypical behavioral disorders decreased when minks were given significantly more space and access to water. A type of livestock farming that is not economically profitable for the fur industry.

## **Death**

During November-December all minks are killed except those who are to be used for breeding. The mink pups have by this time reached the age of six months and are big enough to be skinned. They are usually killed by placing several individuals in a covered box filled with carbon dioxide. Inhalation of carbon dioxide is painful for all animals and the method can take a long time, especially if there's too many in the box at the same time. On the inside of these boxes, like in the gas chambers used by the Nazis, there are signs of pure panic. Mink pups that are younger than 14 days old may be killed by beating. In 2024 the last slaughter of minks is said to take place in Sweden, following a government decision in 2023.

## **The war**

The campaign, simply called Stäng minkfarmen i Falkenberg (Close Falkenberg mink farm), was born on 8 July 2017. Before that, many actions had taken place against both this particular farm and others, but it was now that the newly launched animal rights organization Djurfront really began to point them out in order to streamline the work. In connection with the campaign launch we asked for help in the form of financial support, materials, information and basically anything that could help us. It turned out that many who either did not dare or could not be physically present wanted to support our work and help in other ways. After all, there is a great opposition to fur farms among the average man in Sweden, but this is

something that politicians still chooses to close their eyes to due to the great economic gain and self-interest. Without the Corona pandemic, it is highly likely that at least a few mink farms would still have existed just as before the decision to close them.

Shortly after the campaign started, we took note of the Länsstyrelsens report of the mink farm in Falkenberg, which had been denied on several points. Among other things, we read about how the animals bit themselves in the tail and lost fur, that there was no lighting so that supervision of the animals could not be carried out, that the floors were lacking in almost all cages which is a requirement from January 2014 and that there were no records of which medicines and which animals were treated by a veterinarian.

These reports would only be increasing over the years. Nevertheless, the owner of the farm Niclas Pettersson was never sentenced to animal prohibition, even though he actively refused to comply with the law and was even up in court regarding this. Inspections and controls by the Länsstyrelsen are actually supposed to take place annually according to the law but this happens very rarely, sometimes at several years' intervals or even never. This applies not only to fur animals, but to the entire animal industry in Sweden. The Länsstyrelsen itself believes that this is due to a staff shortage while Djurfront believes it is because of a lack of interest in the welfare of the animals. For example, in 2016, only 8 checks were carried out on Sweden's 70 mink farms.

In August of the same year, Djurfront's campaign began to reach out to the media. Our methods, which were relatively new in Sweden at the time, or at least previously unknown to the public, created debate. Many agreed but did not support what they called "terrorism", while others did not agree at all on any level. Although whatever side they were on, they were upset and this contributed to the media spread and to awaken the debate. Other countries had slowly but surely already banned fur farming, for example the Czech Republic, but Sweden did not want to be a pioneer when it came to fur. They closed their eyes, turned their eyes away or shifted their focus to the terror they thought the farms and farmers were subjected to. Once again, the animals were forgotten as they suffered in their cages.

The Swedish Agriculture Federation, LRF, had now chosen to enter the debate. They visited the farm in Falkenberg together with some privates to show their support and, as they themselves expressed it, as a resistance to the activists visiting the farm. They emphasized cohesion, strength and family feelings as they walked around the corridors and photographed and laughed at the animals that the day had been blessed with beddings, something we never saw before that day. In connection with LRF's visit Niclas Pettersson puts up cameras and a new fence around the farm in Falkenberg, probably thanks to grants and help he received.

After this, our resistance would escalate. Djurfront was well aware of how we were depicted by those who support fur farming, but to their regret we chose to embrace that role rather than reject it. The demonstrations become more intense, flyers, banners and posters were printed up with the message to close the mink farm in Falkenberg, home visits to Niclas Pettersson were organized, activists were chained to the farm gates and demonstration trains through Falkenberg were carried out. Pettersson did also receive phone calls at all times of the day and night from different numbers, sometimes hundreds, and other times it was even Niclas himself who called around to his "colleagues" while behaving extremely suspicious. Vandalizations against both the farm, Pettersson himself and high-ranked people within Svensk Mink (Swedish Mink) was a fact and something that would prove to be extremely effective. The fight has been long and intense and it is impossible for us to rewrite every detail, no matter how important it may be. Therefore, here is a summary of some of the events over the years that we think deserves to be mentioned.

## Timeline

**July 2017** – the campaign Stäng minkfarmen i Falkenberg is born.

**August 2017** – the first of many demonstrations takes place at the farm.

**September 2017** – Djurfront is attending and demonstrating at a meeting for mink farmers at the farm.

**October 2017** – an activist is abused by Pettersson after that Djurfront was blocked by his friends on their way home from the farm.

**October 2017** – Djurfront chains themselves to the farm's gates.

**October 2017** – Pettersson hits an activist with his car during a demonstration.

**October 2017** – during a demonstration at the farm, the tires of the activists' cars are punctured.

**November 2017** – An activist climbs up an alarm tower outside the farm and attaches an ALF-flag to the top.

**November 2017** – outside the Parliament House in Stockholm and in the center of Falkenberg, demonstrations are held with the message to close the mink farm.

**November 2017** – Djurfront enters the mink farm and broadcasts live on Facebook. In the live you can see both alive and dead minks in piles. Pettersson pushes, threatens and beats the activists. Finally, Pettersson along with his son and colleagues, surrounds an activist and abuses him and strips off his masking. The activist uses defensive spray but does not resist.

**December 2017** – a demonstration outside the parliament in Stockholm is held where the message is to close the mink farm in Falkenberg.

**December 2017** – A demonstration is held outside the Swedish embassy in Chile calling for the closure of the mink farm in Falkenberg.

**January 2018** – A party leader debate in parliament is interrupted by activists urging politicians to close the mink farms.

**March 2018** – A film of Marcus Holmgren, highly ranked within the Swedish Agriculture Federation and big supporter of mink farms that we met at the farm in Falkenberg, published by unknown source where he is looking for women and dogs for sexual activities.

**May 2018** – an activist is abused by Pettersson during a demonstration at the farm.

**May 2018** – a double demo is held where activists demonstrate both at Pettersson's home and at the mink farm simultaneously.

**May 2018** – Länsstyrelsen publishes a report after a check up at the farm in Falkenberg that the animals are killed illegally as the killing process takes up to 15 minutes.

**June 2018** – Johan Dalén, CEO of Svensk Mink, is visited by Djurfront at his home where animal friendly messages are sprayed.

**June 2018** – Niclas Pettersson gets visited at night and animal-friendly messages are painted around his residential area.

**November 2018** – activists free 5000 minks.

**November 2018** – Activists from Djurfront are charged after chaining themselves at the mink farm in Falkenberg. The trial will take place in December of the same year and a demonstration will be held outside the courtroom. The activists are sentenced to fines.

**December 2018** – Johan Dahlén, CEO of Svensk Mink, gets his car and his house vandalised. Dahlén quits his work after this.

**February 2019** – Niclas Pettersson receives a plastic skeleton with his name on it.

**April 2019** – Djurfront holds an animal rights camp in Falkenberg.

**May 2018** – An action is held during a football match where Falkenberg FF plays sponsored by Niclas Pettersson.

**June 2018** – Niclas Pettersson's car is burnt down outside his home.

**August 2018** – Four activists are arrested during a demonstration outside the mink farm in Falkenberg after refusing to take off their masking.

**December 2019** – a demonstration is held outside Jörgens Martinsson's home, who is the new CEO of Svensk Mink.

**December 2019** – Niclas Pettersson receives an unwelcome home visit. The farm is being visited by activists simultaneously.

**January 2020** – another unwelcome visit to Pettersson is made. Pettersson himself is hiding behind the curtains in his home.

**March 2020** – A trial is being held with one of Djurfront's activists who is accused of damaging the hearing of a person at the farm with his megaphone. The activist is sentenced to six months in prison and a fine of SEK 30 000.

**April 2020** – A demonstration is being held outside Niclas Pettersson's home. Pettersson is visible in the window but doesn't dare to come out. Posters are glued up at his home.

**June 2020** – a major demonstration is held at the farm where people photograph the minks and then continues home to Niclas Pettersson. There, the police begin to use force to take off the activists' masking, select individual activists for removal and photograph activists without masks.

**January 2021** – 600 minks are freed by activists.

**January 2021** – The government decides that no minks will be bred in 2021 due to the Corona pandemic.

**February 2021** – Djurfront broadcasts live at the mink farm in Falkenberg as they enter the farm to check if Niclas Pettersson has the breeding minks there. Pettersson has kept a low profile lately and we suspect that he has plans to close his business.

**May 2021** – an activist is convicted of several actions against both the mink farm in Falkenberg and other farms in Sweden. The activist is sentenced to a fine.

**2021** – the fur industry is on its knees and Niclas Pettersson believes that the 3 million SEK in subsidies from the state will not be enough for him to survive. After some investigations, Djurfront can conclude that Pettersson has large debts.

**2021 – 2023** – Niclas Pettersson is hardly ever seen. He doesn't make any interviews or statements and Djurfront can't see any activities at the mink farm. Activists are there to photograph and investigate but it appears generally dead.

**September 2023** – The County Board confirms that the mink farm in Falkenberg is closed.

## **The fight continues**

Apart from the crisis during the pandemic that became the idiom nail in the coffin, I personally believe that the intensity of Djurfront in the fight was what caused Pettersson and the farm to fall. We fought on all fronts 24 hours a day and, in short, we made Niclas Pettersson crazy. He did not have a moment of rest and even though our activists also encountered backlashes such as fines and prison sentences, they took it on with a pride. Of course, for the sake of the fight, but above all for the animals. If you have been to a mink farm as an empath and seen the poor minks monotonously move in circles, bite themselves or completely apathetically just exist in the tiny cage, then you know what it is all about. It may sound like a cliché, but what does a fine or a few months in prison mean compared to a whole life in a prison cage, only born to die during an enormous amount of anxiety and fear.

The fight continues. It has to. The closure of the mink farm in Falkenberg was a victory and we look back on our work with pride, but yet there are billions and billions of animals around the world who need our help. We must continue to fight for each individual and if this campaign has taught us something, it is that resistance produces results. It may take time, but sooner or later, what stands in the way of the future will have to move.

For every individual and until everyone is free.