

Cane toads metamorphosise into warts-and-all luxury fashion item on the Torres Strait Islands: On the Torres Strait Islands, wildlife authorities are racing to stop cane toads spreading further. Now, a business venture is turning them into luxury fashion items — warts-and-all.

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FULL TEXT

On the Torres Strait Islands, the booms of heavy rain that herald the wet season also bring a formidable ecological threat: breeding cane toads.

Despite huge populations in some parts of mainland Far North Queensland, the destructive species is, to the islands, a relatively new phenomenon.

"We started noticing cane toads arriving five or six years ago," said Stanley Lui, who has been working in environmental management with the Torres Strait Regional Authority.

Since then, the toads — believed to have arrived by boat — have spread, laying claim to Horn & Thursday Islands' dams & waterways while outpacing local containment efforts.

"They lie dormant — you don't see them much — & then as soon as the wet season rolls around, they get into the smallest, little puddles, where they lay eggs," Mr Lui said.

"One female cane toad can lay up to 30,000 eggs per year."

Torres Strait Island woman, Perina Drummond, witnessed the destructive spread firsthand, growing up on the islands as the creatures began to wreak havoc on the area's unique biodiversity refuge.

Now, the Melbourne-based model has found an unlikely solution to the growing problem — in the fashion industry. Through collaborating with Melbourne-based designer, Lia Tabrah, Ms Drummond has been on a mission to convert cane toad skins into luxury fashion items, in a bid to address the impacts of both the toads & the fashion industry on the environment.

"We are definitely looking for a more sustainable & ethical approach to fashion & what we can do in the sense of leather production," Ms Drummond said.

"I still think it's a gross concept, but [I'm] slowly getting used to it, & you can actually see the beauty in terms of the leather that's being produced with the cane toad skins."

'Not for the faint of heart'

While Ms Tabrah has previously worked with cane toad leather — exhibiting a small line at MONA last year — the project has narrowed its gaze on the Torres Strait Islands.

On a hot summer night around Christmas, the pair set out, catching about 200 of the island-dwelling toads for the research stage of their project.

Local kids, bored on school holidays, earned some pocket money for joining in with the round-up.

Next the toads will be skinned, then dyed in black & neon, before going on display at Melbourne Design Week in March.

"It's an interesting process — not for the faint-hearted," Ms Drummond said.

"But it's a tannery, really, so you're just converting skin into leather.

"And then obviously you do have the sort of artistic influence that Lia has that would bring that sort of artistic creativity to life."

Hopes to grow cottage industry

The work of converting perceptions of the toad skin into something that could be a luxury item is less straightforward, but Ms Drummond said people stand to be surprised.

"What I found interesting with the ones that we've worked on in the Torres Strait is that it's actually quite soft &luxurious," she said.

"You wouldn't think that, but it's very delicate in terms of the touch &feel of it, &very smooth.

"The biggest hurdle is convincing people it's a good idea."

The pair envisioned a model similar to the one that has seen money from crocodile skins flow into some remote Indigenous communities, where locals would eventually be paid for their involvement in the project.

"The whole idea of us coming into these communities in northern Australia is providing that sort of opportunity for locals to make something within the community, &having money being put back into the communities," Ms Drummond said.

In the meantime, they have been hoping it would become a new solution on the cane toad containment frontline, as wildlife authorities anxiously protect outer islands where the species has not yet been detected, as well as places like Prince of Wales Island where they have been.

"We've certainly got a lot of resources," Mr Lui said.

"Those cane toads are everywhere."

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