could you be wearing someone's pet?

Thinking of buying a fake-fur jacket this winter? Take a close look at what it's made from, it may surprise you.

Every year up to two million dogs and cats are slaughtered in the name of fashion. Why? So their coats can be made into hats, gloves, fur-trimmed jackets and toys. And, believe it or not, you could be buying them without realising it. Last year, an inspector from the Humane Society International (HSI) bought a fur-trimmed coat and a toy cat from a Sydney store – and both turned out to be made from dog and cat fur.

According to Nicola Beynon, a HSI spokesperson, fur is being imported to Australia from Thailand, the Philippines, China and Korea. When it arrives here it's sold in boutiques and toy stores to the public, who usually think they're buying fake fur made from acrylic or polyester.

"Sometimes the cats and dogs are bred specially for the fur trade in farms and then transported in cruel conditions to the slaughter houses, where they are killed inhumanely. In other cases the animals are strays that are rounded up, so we can also see people's pets going into the trade," says Nicola.

"Our investigators came across one animal with a name tag attached. That was really sad. Some breeds of animals are bred specially for their fur – they use German Shepherds a lot because they have thick fur. They breed them in northern China, because the fur grows quickly in the cold climate, and then transport them hundreds of kilometres to where they're going to be slaughtered."

What's even more horrifying is the way in which the animals are killed. They're locked up in cramped conditions and killed in front of each other, by methods such as slow suffocation, hanging, clubbing or bleeding to death.

Sometimes the animal isn't even dead before it's skinned. If animals (including those we eat) were killed in Australia this way the people involved would be prosecuted for animal cruelty. However, animal cruelty laws are not enforced in the countries exporting cat and dog fur, as it's an unregulated industry.

is it legal to import them?

In Australia, yes. After the animals are slaughtered and skinned, the furs are sold to specialist fur merchandisers and then exported to Australia and some countries in Europe. The importation of dog and cat fur has been banned in the US, and France, Greece, Italy, Belgium and Denmark have also followed suit.

So why isn't it illegal here? Since the HSI investigation, there has been a lot of pressure from the media and the public for the Federal Government to ban the importing of cat and dog fur, but so far there is no ban.

what can I do?

"The more countries that block imports of these products, the less likely that the industry that profits from this cruelty to animals can survive," says Nicola.

"We can only say to our own government that we don't want the products on sale here."

Sophie Barkl, 17, is one teen who is trying to educate the public on this issue and to persuade the Government to ban cat and dog fur importation. Sophie, who is involved with the HSI, says, "The main thing is talking to people about it, making them aware of the issue, and also writing letters to your local government representative."

spot the fake

It's not easy to identify fake fur from real fur. Check that the tag lists the material as synthetic (such as nylon, polyester or acrylic) and steer clear of anything labelled "fur" (sounds obvious, but it's worth checking).

have your say

Let the Government know that you won't tolerate the importing of cat and dog fur into Australia by writing to: Prime Minister, The Hon John Howard MP, Parliament House, Canberra, ACT 2600.

weblink

For more info on the cat and dog fur trade, and advice on writing a protest letter, log on to the Humane Society International website at **www.hsi.org.au**

WORDS CHRISTINE KNIGHT **PHOTOGRAPHY** SAM BISSO; HUMANE SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL