

# Local focus for local leather



The Seven Leagues team, from left to right: Edgar Gutiérrez Biel, Tasha Nathanson and Jackson Pye Rogers.

**Tom Hogarth** speaks to Seven Leagues, a start-up tanning fish skins in Canada, to find out more about its unique approach to the industry.

**S**even Leagues has had a rough time getting off the ground. Starting in 2019, the company was very quickly stopped in its tracks by the Covid pandemic and has only just begun to get to work, gaining access to its production facilities in May 2022. The company employs three people in total, with a larger team of people employed on a contract basis, such as Gunnsteinn Björnsson of Atlantic Leather based in Iceland. The primary team consists of Tasha Nathanson, Director of Tanning Operations, a tanning specialist and a marketing, indigenous partnerships and social media officer.

In Nathanson's words: "Seven Leagues is a fish leather tannery and fish leather boot enterprise, upcycling fisheries and forestry waste crafted locally by urban workers. Created from sea and tree, fish leather is an eco-luxury good. We aim to sell wholesale fish leather to the global market and later boots, mostly to North Americans. With a higher tensile strength

per thickness than mammal leather and a gorgeous pattern, fish skin is transformed into a durable, beautiful material through our eco-friendly vegetable tanning process."

The company focuses on tanning Pacific species, specifically those that come from responsible wild catches, and only uses by-products from food processing. These fish would include five species of salmon found locally – Chinook, Coho, Chum, Sockeye and Pink – though Seven Leagues is also experimenting with other local fish including halibut, tuna, cod, rockfish and ling. The focus is for the company to help support coastal communities and fisherfolk making a living in the local area in British Columbia, Canada.

"There are already European tanneries using farmed Atlantic salmon for leather and here fish farms really threaten our wild stocks. So, we're throwing our support towards coastal communities and the fisherfolk making a living locally and using our business to support them," Nathanson said.

Seven Leagues plans to provide 80% of its production for wholesale leather sales and is looking for business partners who are looking specifically to make something with fish leather, but particularly from a business with a story and the principles that Seven Leagues prides itself on. Meanwhile, 20% of the production will be focused on, initially, producing the company's own style of unisex boot in fish leather, ideal for the local climate.

This concept began when Nathanson took a 10-day intensive shoemaking course and turned fish leather she had hand-tanned herself into a pair of desert boots, before putting the footwear through its paces across a six-month period in two seasons of British Columbia weather through snow and rain. She noted that, while the leather performed admirably, the cheap thread she had used did not. However, the shoes served as a worthy prototype and the beginning of an idea that will form a cornerstone of the business in its initial phases.

Another cornerstone of the business is the use of vegetable tanning, specifically using bark tannins. At the moment, Seven Leagues has to import tannins for its leather





Seven Leagues' startup tannery is located on the University of British Columbia campus.

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production, which Nathanson likened to sending sand to the Sahara. However, she reached out to the forestry sector in British Columbia and found a solution: "I reached out to the forest sector with the idea of local tannin production, and I found an interested ear in Forest Products Innovation, which is a private national, not-for-profit organisation that specialises in the creation of solutions in support of the Canadian forest sector's global competitiveness.

"So, they crosschecked the information I gave them with the University of

Northampton and in fact began working with the university to validate the project and it is moving ahead. So, the initiative is to use bark, which is a by-product of hemlock wood processing here in British Columbia, and this will become an indigenous-owned business to produce the tannin. And we hope eventually to purchase that tannin from them. Son that's not directly our project, it's one we inspired because the foresters would never have thought of the leather industry without me coming to talk to them."

This use of bark tannings is central for the business, focused on the concepts of using local at-hand resources, helping towards a circular economy and upcycling waste, something which naturally goes hand-in-hand with leather production. Further to this, Nathanson explained that the vegetable tanning provides some tangible benefits for the leather itself. The process results in a thicker leather, which works better for the naturally thin fish skin, while the look, touch and smell are all satisfying.

"It is the most gorgeous, deep sort of reddish-brown colour," she added. "It's absolutely beautiful. The smell is fantastic and it is a tree that's highly renewable. It grows quickly, it's a soft wood. So very different from the impact of, say, taking down oak trees." ▶



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Above: Suede and glazed salmon leather.

Right: Nathanson's proof of concept fish leather shoes held up for six months in British Columbia weather.

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### Urban micro tannery model

Focusing on a process which results in a pleasant smelling tanning environment is an upside which will translate well to another focus of the business – the urban micro tannery model. Nathanson explained that this is an idea developed from scratch by looking at the examples of other industries – such as microbreweries – and wanting to bring the tannery to the consumer so that they can better understand the process and the benefits of responsible leather production, rather than being hidden away on an industrial estate.

This is an opportunity uniquely afforded by the small scale of the business, but one that will allow the company to do things that few or no other tanneries in the world can do – bring ordinary people into the tannery and be entirely transparent. It's also a side effect of the benefits of tanning fish skins. Nathanson explained that because the fish skins are cleaner, requiring less of an involved fleshing process, and can be processed in large numbers in smaller equipment, the entire business requires less space. She added: “My drum would be a test drum in another kind of tannery, but it's our production drum here.” An urban micro tannery model also helps constrict the supply chain alongside the company's efforts to source raw materials locally and invest in the community, mitigating supply chain risks.

And the tourism and leather promotion benefits are obvious. Nathanson said: “I've not seen this done anywhere else. In Iceland, a lot of people were interested in visiting Atlantic Leather, which is now called Nordic Leather. It's still a tourism draw, but it is in an outer area. It's



not the same. Our location is a high-traffic area, with both tourist and local traffic. So, it's an opportunity not only for us but for the leather industry as a whole to get that message out there because, in as much as people have seen leather tanning, it's often maybe in Morocco where it's not the same sort of modern process that is being used elsewhere in the world.”

A core value of Seven Leagues stems from its approach to local production, making a positive change locally. For a business operating in British Columbia, working with indigenous, First Nations peoples is key. Nathanson explained: “One of our six core values as a company is resonance – that we want to work not just for our own benefit, but to radiate benefit outward to

partners and other communities. This includes sourcing and partnerships towards working with indigenous peoples and also designing some positions specifically for workers facing barriers to employment.

“Colonisation not only dispossessed indigenous people of their land but there were also specific policies put in place to try to make it more difficult for them to make a living, and that has impacts even now. So, we want to find a respectful and workable way for all people who live in North America to be able to make a living and so we put a priority on working with indigenous Nations businesses and people to do our part to repair the relations in North America.”

### Best fish forward

Hampered by the pandemic, Seven Leagues has not had much time to get up and running, but now that the ground is under them, the team is ready to make waves. Nathanson said: “Our plan is to get this up and running and working and then to replicate. So, whether it's up and down this coast, where there are other coastal places that have fish processing, again, it's that idea of micro-manufacturing, close to where the supplies are especially where there's that beautiful trifecta of tourists, local demand and social jobs need, because that's very much part of what we're trying to do.”

It may well be that, in a few years, there will be Seven Leagues outposts conducting fish tanning on a small scale across the coasts of Canada and beyond, supporting local communities and practicing responsible tanning out in the open where everyone can gain an appreciation for it. Regardless of where the company heads next, its model is a fresh take on what the leather industry can do to produce leather in the right way and be transparent while doing it. |