

Wool Country, Land of Sheep

ウールの国 羊の国

On May 15-18, 2023, the International Wool Textile Organization (IWTO) held its annual general meeting in Kyoto. Over the course of four days, an international conference was held to discuss the future of the wool business. Each day featured slide lectures and meetings. There were buffet-style lunches with a variety of dishes, more food than everyone could eat. In the evenings, formal dinners were hosted. Anticipating the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, this event was delayed by one year, bringing together 220 top professionals from the global wool industry.

During the slide lectures, the current status reports of wool-exporting countries such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, South America and United Kingdom were presented, along with insights into the marketing and consumption trends of wool-processing countries and consumer countries like United States, China and Europe. As the current state of the wool industry, which has reduced by half in the last 30 years, was reported from various countries, one phrase that caught my attention was, "Could there be some 'greenwash' in the current promotion of wool?" This question was raised by a participant from New Zealand, suggesting that there might be a lack of actual practices, with SDGs being used merely as a façade and companies creating an image without substance.

On the final day, IWTO 2023's keyword was announced as "sports & casual." I couldn't believe my ears because to me, both "sports" and "casual" felt like keywords associated with synthetic fibers. "Casual" seems to be in response to the lifestyle changes brought about by post-COVID remote work. However, for "sports," it requires the necessity of being "washable" in a washing machine. To achieve this, the characteristic "felting" of wool must be processed to prevent shrinking. This can be done by dissolving the scales or solidifying them with resin. Indeed, it's a bit unusual. Creating non-felting wool goes against the natural characteristic of wool, which is known for felting. Felting (or turning into felt) is what makes wool unique compared to other fibers. This felting process is what ensures that the finished fabric remains stable and doesn't unravel even when cut. Repeating the message that wool can be used in the same way as synthetic fibers doesn't seem like a winning strategy, given the significantly higher cost of wool compared to synthetics. So, why is the wool industry following in the footsteps of chemical fibers? There should be different, unique keywords for wool. Or is it because the wool industry is solely focusing on ultra-fine Merino wool?

I was puzzled by the keyword, and various question marks were swirling in my mind.

2023年5月15~18日、IWTO (International Wool Textile Organization) の総会が京都で開かれました。これからのウールビジネスについて、4日間の国際会議。連日のスライドレクチャーとミーティングが開催されました。食べきれないほどの料理が並び立食ランチ。夜はフォーマルディナー。コロナ明けを待って、1年遅れの開催ということもあり、世界中からウール関係のトップが220人集まりました。

スライドレクチャーでは、オーストラリア、ニュージーランド、南アフリカ、南米、英国とウール輸出国の現状報告、そしてアメリカ、中国、ヨーロッパとウール加工国消費国のマーケティングと消費の動向。この30年間で半減したウール業界の現状が、各国から報告される中、私の耳に止まったのは「今のウールのプロモーションには、「グリーンウォッシュ」もあるのではないか」という言葉でした。すなわち実践が伴っていない、看板だけのSDGs、企業イメージづくりがあるのではないか、というニュージーランド参加者からの意見でした。

最終の4日目。IWTO 2023のキーワードは「sports & casual」であると発表されました。私はおもわず耳を疑いました。私には sports も casual もどちらも化繊のキーワードのように感じたからです。「カジュアル」はコロナ以降の在宅ワークというライフスタイルの変化を受けてのことでしょう。しかし「スポーツ」であるにはウォッシュャブル（洗濯機で洗える）である必要があります。それにはウールの特長である「縮絨」を、縮まないように加工しなくてはなりません。スケールを溶かすか、樹脂で固めるか…。でもなんかヘン。縮絨しないウールを作るって、「ウールは縮絨する」ことが他の繊維と違う特長です。縮絨(=フェルト化)するから出来上がりの生地は裁断してもほどけず安定した生地になるのです。いまさらウールが化繊と同じメッセージと用途を掲げても、価格では化繊の何倍も高価なウール、勝負できるわけがない。なのになぜ、化学繊維の後追いをするのかしら？ウールにはもっと違うキーワードがあるはず…。それともウール業界とは、極細のメリノだけにフォーカスしているからかしら？

私の中ではさまざまな？マークが渦巻きました。

WOOL is a Shelter

WOOLはシェルター

極寒のモンゴル北部に住む遊牧民も、灼熱のサハラ砂漠の民トゥアレグ族も、WOOLのマントや毛皮をまとうて生きてきました。それはシロクマやラクダが毛を持つことで厳しい環境で生きてきたように、人は羊からその毛をもらうことによって体を守ってきたのだと思います。

Nomadic herders living in the frigid northern regions of Mongolia, as well as the Tuareg people in the scorching Sahara Desert, have both survived by wearing WOOL mantles and fur. In much the same way that polar bears and camels have fur to survive in harsh environments, I believe humans have protected themselves by receiving the wool from sheep to shield their bodies.

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