

Treatment of Animals in Agriculture

Factory farming is demeaning to both humans and animals alike. The Secretary of the Farm and Food Society looks at how farmers can regain the respect of the public.

{mosgoogle}"The factory farmer cannot rely, as did his forebears, on generations of experience gained from the animals themselves and handed down from father to son; he relies on a vast array of backroom boys with computing machines working to discover the breeds, feeds and environment most suited to convert food into flesh at the greatest possible speed, and every batch of animals reaching market is a sequel to another experiment..."[1] Ruth Harrison

When animals were first domesticated to provide food for mankind they derived certain benefits: they were protected from predators and extremes of weather, given freedom to roam within certain limits and as far as possible their food was guaranteed. Nomads and settled pastoral communities shared their lives with their beasts, while shepherds and herdsmen, knowing their value, treated them accordingly. Certain brutal practices, such as castration, might be regarded as being offset by these advantages. Slaughter certainly left much to be desired, but was not necessarily any worse than the death they would have met in their wild state. Such disadvantages still apply today. Growth of populations, urbanisation and the industrialisation of agriculture saw a worsening of conditions for livestock. In countries like America and Australia, with vast plains only suitable for stock-rearing, animals began to be subjected to mass production and slaughter. In the early 19th Century, where once wild buffalo had wandered, herds of cattle numbering 200,000 - 400,000 were being ranched: "parents of the gigantic herds later driven to the inferno of the Chicago stockyards." [2] Following the second World War America again took the lead in mass production of chickens, the first broiler birds being imported illegally into Britain to found a new industry dealing with millions of creatures in factory farms and sent to slaughter on conveyor-belts. Pigs soon followed, at first in Europe where sows began to be kept in narrow stalls, piglets in crowded pens or in battery cages like laying-hens. By the late 1970s America was catching up an executive from Walls Meat Co, writing in the National Hog Farmer, stated that the breeding sow "should be thought of and treated as a valuable piece of machinery whose function is to pump out baby pigs like a sausage machine." [3] A poultry catalogue in England offered "precision engineered chicks". In a recent edition of Poultry World the managing director of a poultry company described the Hisex Brown bird as a 4-wheel drive version in which the chassis had been strengthened and the gearing improved. [4] These new systems were claimed to protect the animals from predators and certain parasites, keep them warm, dry and well fed, as though this fulfilled all their needs. But their mobility was severely curtailed or prevented altogether, they were deprived of any choice of food or the chance to forage, the opportunity to make nests or choose mates. They had ceased to be entities. A description of the pig industry today in Northern California refers to "reeking lagoons surrounding darkened warehouses of animals trapped in metal crates barely larger than their bodies, tails chopped off, pumped with corn, soy beans and chemicals until, in six months, they weigh about 240 lbs at which point they are shipped off to abattoirs... ." [5] Such methods were being introduced in the period following the second World War in all developed countries and exported to less sophisticated regions. In Africa, for instance, broiler chickens, kept in deplorable conditions, have taken the place of the indigenous quail, used to living freely, finding shelter in long grass and foraging for its own food: [6] hardly an improvement. Growing Concern For a long time complaints from people who found battery cages, veal-crates, sow-stalls, narrow cubicles in which cows could not lie in comfort, unacceptable, were brushed aside. The world had to be fed. However, it became apparent that intensive livestock systems were using immense quantities of grain, soya and fishmeal which could have solved the human hunger problem far more efficiently than feeding them to animals. This argument has never been dealt with, and the concern about animal cruelty in such systems has been met with demands for scientific proof that animals suffered.

With a few exceptions, vets kept their heads down, turning a blind eye when visiting enormous units in which chickens shuffled around, sometimes being trodden into the litter or dying because they could not reach a water supply or food source; laying hens squashed into cages, unable to turn, stretch their wings or groom themselves, and crippled by the wire floor they gripped with their claws. These, and other arrangements directed towards profit are still operating in spite of thirty years of growing protest. Scientists have been mainly involved in developing more intensive methods and, with the advent of genetic engineering, in trying to increase the productivity and reduce the sensitivity of food animals. Over the years some vets have become critical. A very constructive collection of papers, edited by a former Ministry of Agriculture vet, and containing contributions from colleagues in Sweden, France and the Netherlands in addition to a number from the UK, was published in 1992. [7] This frankly examined the unacceptable lengths to which intensification has been taken. A veterinary demand that cows should be enabled to bear calves to the full term and deliver them naturally was met with a complaint to the House of Lords that this was hampering scientific advance. [8] Transgenic animals were being produced before any protective legislation was envisaged. In America the notorious Beltsville pig, blind, with respiratory problems and so arthritic it could only struggle along on its knees, became an arresting symbol of "progress" getting out of control. Although genetic engineering of animals is proving far more difficult than manipulation of plants, such research is continuing, failed experiments being quietly disposed of. The ruthless exploitation which has replaced the one-time peaceful and relatively benign attitude towards the creatures which feed us has not been without other critics. Consumers have protested long and loud, but have continued to buy intensively produced meat and eggs, although alternatives are now becoming available. Many other factual and enlightened books have appeared since Ruth Harrison's definitive *Animal Machines*. Philosophers are bringing the subject under scrutiny, Peter Singer having led the way with *Animal Liberation* [9] and subsequent publications. The veterinary voice is being more often heard. In the countries of Northern Europe new laws protecting livestock have been introduced and experiments are being made in keeping pigs and poultry in less intensive conditions and sometimes outdoors. Certain supermarkets are producing their own welfare codes. In the UK these are usually based on the voluntary guidelines of the Farm Animal Welfare Council, a Government-appointed body which, while well-intentioned, has not succeeded in making the

majority of its recommendations mandatory. It has, however, adopted the principle of the "Five Freedoms":

- freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition
- freedom from discomfort
- freedom from injury and disease
- freedom from pain and distress
- freedom to express normal patterns of behaviour

These "freedoms" are still not generally applied. The Economic Imperative A leading article in the Veterinary Record [10] has pointed out that "while some might argue that animal welfare should be above worldly considerations, the harsh reality is that economies affect every aspect of the welfare debate. It is so often said that you get what you pay for in this world, and nowhere is this more true than in livestock production where, for the last half century, the emphasis has been on producing as much food as possible at the lowest possible price." One of the main obstacles to progress is competition. Already UK Ministers of Agriculture have guaranteed that no further improvements in farm animal welfare will be subject to legislation unless this is adopted throughout the European Union. This effectively means that it will be put off indefinitely. The infamous veal-crate, banned in Britain, does not seem likely to be phased out in the rest of Europe until well into the next century. Certain Southern States are even objecting to animals being classed as "sentient beings" rather than "agricultural goods." Some of the Northern States, with their higher welfare laws, might succeed in getting some improvements, but with the countries of Eastern Europe likely to come in, some of which have very rudimentary standards, the outlook is not very promising. Throughout history there have been those who have expressed revulsion to cruelty to animals and have adapted their lifestyles accordingly. Some religious orders have eschewed meat, but, strangely, the modern Church has been largely reticent, although all the great religions enjoin kindness to animals. Some monks and nuns have not been averse to running their own factory farms. So where do we stand? The fact that the better we treat our farm animals, the better the food they will produce, needs to be widely acknowledged. It is ironic that cows are better treated in Uganda, where they are scarce and highly valued, than in developed countries. Progress would now certainly be made in some areas but for international competition, stimulated by GATT, whereby better conditions for livestock, an embargo on export for slaughter and on meat from animals whose growth has been stimulated by hormones are considered "barriers to trade". Most farmers would prefer to treat their animals well, and in Britain there is a growing trend towards "farm assurance" schemes in which producers co-operate in drawing up quality schedules which include animal welfare considerations. There are also moves to lighten the burden on dairy cows which until recently have been largely excluded from consumer concern. Another advance is being made in the recognition of high intelligence in livestock, the Farm Animal Welfare Council having conceded that "farm animals may be capable of more complex thought than previously acknowledged by scientists. The ability of animals to plan ahead, to predict the behaviour of others, to learn by indirect observation, to recall absent objects and to deceive, are all areas of active investigation." [11] Scientific proof relating to farm animal suffering is accumulating, but these things take time, and meanwhile the giant rearing units continue, in which there is no possibility of the creatures being anything but mass-produced fodder for human beings. With no restraint on genetic engineering, this new science is forging ahead at an alarming pace. Genetic selection in the past was by no means without fault, but at least it took place slowly, with time to adjust if mistakes were made. Anita Idel, a German vet., has pointed out that only very few people know that thousands of genetically engineered pigs, sheep, cattle and rabbits already exist in research laboratories and the "equation of animals with machines can be seen nowhere more clearly than in this development." [12] Legislation in this sphere is urgent. Meanwhile there is great merit in a proposal, backed by Professor John Webster of Bristol University, for Government subsidies directed towards welfare of livestock. These would be welcomed by farmers and consumers alike and would mean that increases in retail prices, which they might occasion, could be avoided. A better relationship between farmers and animals would increase the dignity and well being of both and inspire respect in consumers, now inclined to be highly critical of what was formerly a respected way of life.

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