

Animal Cruelty or the Price of Dinner?



By Nicholas Kristof

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THIS month a man in Orlando, Fla., dangled a dog by the scruff of its neck over a second-floor balcony, threatening to drop it 12 feet to the ground.

Onlookers intervened and tried to rescue the dog. Someone posted a video of the dangling dog on Facebook, and the clip went viral. Galvanized by public outrage, the police combed the area and on Tuesday announced that a 23-year-old man named Ransom May II had been arrested on a charge of cruelty to animals. The arrest made news nationwide.

Meanwhile, in the United States this year, almost nine billion chickens will be dangled upside down on conveyor belts and slaughtered; when the process doesn't work properly, the birds are scalded alive.

Hmm. So scaring one dog stirs more reaction than far worse treatment of billions of chickens.

Look, I don't believe in reincarnation. But if I'm wrong, let's hope you and I are fated to come back as puppies and not as chickens.

A new investigation by Compassion in World Farming, an animal rights group, highlights the way the poultry industry today is often inhumane for birds, wrenching for farmers and potentially unhealthy for consumers. The investigation includes stomach-churning video of what actually goes on in chicken barns.

In particular, the video shows images of a grotesque disease called gangrenous dermatitis that a website about the poultry industry calls a No. 1 health problem for some chicken companies. To watch the video is to develop an appetite for soy.



Mike Weaver at his West Virginia chicken farm. Jay Paul for The New York Times

“When birds get it, it eats their muscles and bones and organs away until they drop dead,” Mike Weaver, a West Virginia chicken farmer in the video, told me. “The bird just rots away; it turns to mush.”

Eric Hedrick, who raises 1.1 million chickens a year in West Virginia, said he had no evidence that the disease harms humans, but added, “I’d be apprehensive about buying a chicken in the market.”

Both Weaver and Hedrick raise their chickens for Pilgrim’s, one of the country’s biggest chicken producers. Bill Lovette, C.E.O. of Pilgrim’s, refused to comment. A company spokesman, Cameron Bruett, said that all sick birds are screened out and

never make it to the table, and that even if they did, there would be no health risk to humans.

Weaver and Hedrick, who risk their livelihood by speaking out, say that the chicken companies rig the system against the ordinary farmers who actually raise the birds for them. The companies supply the birds and feed, so the farmers describe themselves as modern sharecroppers, with no control over their operations, squeezed by the companies and punished if they protest.

A 12-piece KFC chicken meal costs about \$30, and the farmers say their share is about 1 percent of that — less than the tax.

In fairness, the chicken companies excel at producing cheap food, with the price of chicken falling by at least half in real terms since 1930. Chicken is cheap partly because companies have tinkered with genetics so that a baby chick burgeons in five weeks to a full-size bird with an enormous breast. By my calculations, if humans grew that explosively, a baby at five weeks would weigh almost 300 pounds.

Yet today there's growing recognition, from the Obama administration to rural America to urban foodies, that this agribusiness model is profoundly flawed.

“I wouldn't say it is dysfunctional,” Weaver told me. “More like it is functioning very well for the companies and their executives only, and very poorly for farmers and consumers.”

The animal welfare issue is a bit complicated. Chickens raised for meat roam within a barn, so while conditions are grim, these chickens are at least better off than egg-laying hens crowded into tiny cages.

I'm also struck that less than 5 percent of the meat chickens die prematurely, which is lower than the mortality rates for humans in many countries I report in. In Angola, one child in six dies before the age of 5.

Yet terrible things happening to children shouldn't excuse abuse of animals. Moreover, Leah Garces of Compassion in World Farming argues that modern chicken genetics constitute a form of abuse: It is inhumane, she says, to breed a bird with a huge breast that its legs can barely support.

"Chickens have a cage," she said. "It's their own body." She has a point: Many chickens today stagger about, sometimes on splayed legs, or mostly just sit down.

Poultry farming now is entirely different from what it was when I was a farm kid in Oregon with our family flock of chickens. Today's business model is infinitely more efficient, but it also raises environmental concerns such as antibiotic overuse and is fundamentally oppressive for animals and farmers alike.

Responding to those consumer concerns, Whole Foods announced last month that it would sell a chicken with more traditional genetics. Whole Foods has been ahead of the industry on these issues, and I'm betting other companies will follow.

When even chicken farmers say that the system has failed, it's time for consumers to use their buying power to push for food that causes less harm to everyone, human and bird alike. If we can rally on behalf of a frightened dog in Orlando, can't we also muster concern for billions of farm animals — as well as the humans struggling to raise them?

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