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Sanctuary Perspectives on “Humane” Animal Products

People who work with rescued farmed animals at sanctuaries have a unique perspective when it comes to talking about “humane” conditions of animals exploited for food. *Satya* asked a handful of sanctuary founders to share their views on the growing association of animal rights groups with welfare reform and how they respond when people ask them about “humane” meat and “cage-free” eggs.



Michele with Hens.
Photo courtesy of Peaceful Prairie Sanctuary

As a founder of a sanctuary for farmed animals, the most abused of all creatures on the planet, what are your thoughts about the increasing association of animal rights groups with the meat industry, for example, endorsing Whole Foods and working on its Animal Compassionate standards, or advocating switching to cage-free eggs?

It is disheartening, frustrating and discouraging...to say the least. We smaller grassroots organizations and, of course, the animals themselves, rely on the huge multi-million dollar organizations who have exposure and resources to expose *the truth* about the horrors inherent in all forms of animal agriculture.

Knowing that they are the public face—so to speak—of the AR movement, they should be an honest representation of the movement and its mission, promoting veganism (as the

only effective means to advocate for the cessation of cruelty and murder of farmed animals), and resisting temptation to appease donors if promoting veganism is compromised and/or the exploitation of some farmed animals is offered as an acceptable and even desirable alternative to the exploitation of other farmed animals.

They should also tell us what their “exit strategy” is. When will these “leaders” come back and address the duping of consumers and the stepped-up production and marketing of “humanely produced” animal products? Any term referring to the supposed “humane production” of animal products is an oxymoron. The consumer is now more confused than ever when they are being told simultaneously by both animal rights/welfare groups and the industries themselves in the same language, that it’s okay, and even good, to abuse and murder some animals in place of others. How are we true vegan advocates to counter all of the misinformation? When will the big organizations come back to the public and say, ‘Oh, by the way, when we gave you all those pats on the back for switching to eggs labeled “cage-free,” we weren’t exactly forthcoming with you. We knew all along that the hens are still debeaked, force-molted, brutally murdered at less than two years of age, never see the sun, and all of their rooster brothers are still horrifically murdered at the very same hatcheries that provide animals for the battery operations. So we basically lied to you before, and you have been not only supporting extreme animal cruelty and murder, but you have also helped finance the growth of one of the most profitable and rapidly growing animal exploiting industries in history!’

In your experiences at the sanctuary, are you finding people, rather than moving toward rejecting suffering outright by considering vegetarianism, they’re saying ‘What about humane meat?’ or ‘I’ll just buy my meat at Whole Foods’? How do you respond to this?

No exaggeration: every person or group who visits the sanctuary, no matter what their background, age, sex or socioeconomic position, beams with pride when they proclaim, “It’s okay, I only buy cage-free eggs and organic milk.” We have the same amount of people respond with those lines when we are tabling or leafleting. Again, the location doesn’t seem to matter. PPS recently decided we have to prioritize the debunking of “humanely” produced animal products in all of our campaigns, education and outreach because there is NO such thing. Some of the most egregious cases of animal abuse we have encountered have come from so-called cage-free facilities and family farms. After a visitor proudly proclaims, “I only buy cage-free eggs,” we will pick up Libby, a hen rescued from a cage-free facility and hold her mutilated body up next to Jewel, a hen rescued from a battery facility. The visitors are asked to tell us which hen came from which type of operation. They invariably cannot tell the difference. When we describe the conditions of the cage-free facility, the visitors are even more perplexed, and even angered. We also do not leave out the details of both Jewel and Libby’s rooster brothers having been murdered at hatcheries in the same gruesome and *inhumane* manner.

The promotion of misleading and false labeling of animal products is a major step backwards for advocates like us who have always been armed with the truth when exposing the lies, omissions and misinformation put forth by the dairy, egg and flesh industries. Unfortunately, we now find ourselves having to scream from the mountaintops about the reality of the deplorable conditions for all animals from birth/hatching to the last gruesome and terrifying day of their miserable lives. But we are forced to, so that the consumer may make educated decisions based on indisputable facts pertaining to all animal products.

Most people are confused and even feel betrayed they were told by respected organizations, on whom they relied for accurate information, that these products were a “humane” choice. No one wants to believe (or be told) that they support any kind of animal abuse—especially when they thought they had made a significant lifestyle change motivated by their desire to not support animal abuse. We are left with the position of filling in the gaping blanks left *intentionally* by the huge organizations and agribusiness industries.

Within the last two years, PPS has ceased to use the term “factory farming.” For decades we activists were able to use that term because the only alternative to “factory farming” was veganism. Now, thanks to widespread marketing ploys by the animal exploiting industries, combined with free advertising and promoting of animal products with warm-fuzzy labels by animal advocacy organizations, the compassionate consumer is inundated with what they perceive to be an acceptable alternative. They are desperate to not have to change a thing in their lifestyle (go vegan) so they can continue feeling (incorrectly) that they are not contributing to animal cruelty when they purchase “cage-free,” etc.

We are now forced to refer to it as “animal agribusiness” rather than “factory farming” so we can be clear about what constitutes support of animal cruelty. This is yet another example of our own language being co-opted in order to sell the suffering of animals.

All in all, it has made our job as farmed animal advocates even more difficult than it always has been. Meanwhile, the sense of urgency continues to increase for farmed animals and for those of us charged with their protection.

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