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Caged battery hens in a chicken farm in Catania, Sicily on October 29, 2005. (Getty Images)

January 12th, 2012
04:31 PM ET

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Singer: Europe's ethical eggs

Editor's Note: Peter Singer is professor of bioethics at Princeton University and Laureate Professor at the University of Melbourne. His books include *Animal Liberation*, *Practical Ethics*, *The Ethics of What We Eat*, and *The Life You Can Save*. For more from Singer, visit [Project Syndicate's website](#), or check it out on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

By **Peter Singer**

Forty years ago, I stood with a few other students in a busy Oxford street handing out leaflets protesting the use of battery cages to hold hens. Most of those who took the leaflets did not know that their eggs came from hens kept in cages so small that even one bird — the cages normally housed four — would be unable to fully stretch and flap her wings. The hens could never walk around freely, or lay

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eggs in a nest.

Many people applauded our youthful idealism, but told us that we had no hope of ever changing a major industry. They were wrong.

On the first day of 2012, keeping hens in such cages became illegal, not only in the United Kingdom, but in all 27 countries of the European Union. Hens can still be kept in cages, but they must have more space, and the cages must have nest boxes and a scratching post. Last month, members of the British Hen Welfare Trust provided a new home for a hen they named "Liberty." She was, they said, among the last hens in Britain still living in the type of cages we had opposed.

In the early 1970s, when the modern animal-liberation movement began, no major organization was campaigning against the battery cage. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the mother of all animal-protection organizations, had lost its early radicalism long before. It focused on isolated cases of abuse, and failed to challenge well-established ways of mistreating animals on farms or in laboratories. It took a concerted effort by the new animal radicals of the 1970s to stir the RSPCA from its complacency towards the battery cage and other forms of intensive animal rearing.

Eventually, the new animal-rights movement managed to reach the broader public. Consumers responded by buying eggs from free-ranging hens. Some supermarket chains even ceased to carry eggs from battery hens.

In Britain and some European countries, animal welfare became politically salient, and pressure on parliamentary representatives mounted. The European Union established a scientific committee to investigate animal-welfare issues on farms, and the committee recommended banning the battery cage, along with some other forms of close confinement of pigs and calves. A ban on battery cages in the EU was eventually adopted in 1999, but, to ensure that producers would have plenty of time to phase out the equipment in which they had invested, its implementation was delayed until January 1, 2012.

To its credit, the British egg industry accepted the situation, and developed new and less cruel methods of keeping hens. Not all countries are equally ready, however, and it has been estimated that up to 80 million hens may still be in illegal battery cages. But at least 300 million hens who would have lived miserable lives in standard battery cages are now in significantly better conditions, and there is great pressure on the EU bureaucracy to enforce the ban everywhere - not least from egg producers who are already complying with it.

With the ban on battery cages, Europe confirms its place as the world leader in animal welfare, a position also reflected in its restrictions on the use of animals to test cosmetics. But why is Europe so far ahead of other countries in its concern for animals?

In the United States, there are no federal laws about how egg producers house their hens. But, when the issue was put to California voters in 2008, they overwhelmingly supported a proposition requiring that all farm animals have room to stretch their limbs fully and turn around without touching other animals or the sides of their cage. That suggests that the problem may not be with U.S. citizens' attitudes, but rather that, at the federal level, the U.S. political system allows industries with large campaign chests too much power to thwart the wishes of popular majorities.

In China, which, along with the U.S., confines the largest number of hens in cages, an animal welfare movement is only just beginning to emerge. For the sake of the welfare of billions of farmed animals, we should wish it rapid growth and success.

The start of this year is a moment to celebrate a major advance in animal welfare, and, therefore, for Europe, a step towards becoming a more civilized and humane society - one that shows its concern for all beings capable of suffering. It is also an occasion for celebrating the effectiveness of democracy, and the power of an ethical idea.

The anthropologist Margaret Mead is reported to have said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." The last part may not be true, but the first part surely is. The end of the battery cage in Europe is a less dramatic development

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The U.S. owns 11 of the world's 20 aircraft carriers. The nation with the second most, Italy, owns 2.



fareedzakaria

12:43 pm ET January 13, 2012

RETWEET

Peter Singer on the importance of treating animals decently: globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/01/12/sin

fareedzakaria

10:11 am ET January 13, 2012

than the Arab Spring, but, like that popular uprising, it began with a small group of thoughtful and committed people.

The views expressed in this article are solely those of Peter Singer.

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Peter Singer

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soundoff (9 Responses)

F. Benson

Right now, the U.S. egg industry is attempting to OVERTURN California's Proposition 2 in order to keep hens in cages forever. Help stop factory farm cruelty. Learn the facts, take action. Please visit <http://www.StopTheRottenEggBill.org>.

January 12, 2012 at 7:56 pm | [Reply](#)

Rick

The best and only real solution is the human population needs to dramatically decrease. With a current world population of 7 billion, it is impossible for chickens to lay enough eggs to feed 7 billion people annually, which goes the same for beef, fish and other edibles for humanity. The reason we have global warming is because the planet has too many human beings struggling and fighting for limited resources. However, if the world population was only 7 million that amount would certainly alleviate the pressures humanity places on the Earth, i.e. forcing chickens to lay billions of eggs by placing them in cramped quarters to compel the hen to lay eggs. Imagine businesses around the world would only have to provide for 7 million people instead of 7 billion. Therefore, we need global policies that would encourage the decrease of the human population. First, criminalize the health industry and execute all doctors. If you are dying that only means its time for you to die. Second, nations need to end the love affair with the notion of "peace". The world needs more devastating world wars in order to stabilize the population. The reason ancient populations never grew much is because societies were constantly at war with one another. Third, nations need to develop systematic exterminations of the elderly. The world needs to create a cut-off point for living. If you are 65, then you need to report to facility in order to be exterminated in order preserve limited resources. That's how humanity can save this planet. It may seem cruel to human beings, but I'm sure the animals of this planet and the planet would appreciate policies that reign in human profligacy.

January 14, 2012 at 11:56 am | [Reply](#)

j. von hettlingen

Megastates like China, India, the U.S. etc. think they have better things to do. They neglect so often the wellbeing of their own citizens, let alone the animals.

January 13, 2012 at 4:04 am | [Reply](#)

Karen Davis, PhD

An "enriched" cage is still a battery cage ("battery" is a unit of identical objects stacked and/or lined up in rows), so to say that the battery cage has been banned in the EU is incorrect. The totally barren battery cage is now illegal (good), but hens will continue to be locked in battery cages, stacked on top of each other and lined up in 400' to 500 foot long buildings probably forever as long as millions of people continue to buy and demand cheap eggs. So-called enriched cages have tiny furnishings, "nests" generally are comfortless plastic strips (albeit less comfortless than wire floors), and if there is a dustbathing area in each cage, the atmosphere will be even more clogged with debris than it already is in these filthy, unwholesome and totally inhumane henitentiaries.

In short, the facts need to be clearly stated and understood. In addition, the catching, transport and killing of the hens is not covered by the new law. So let's not crow too vigorously. Karen Davis, PhD, President, United Poultry Concerns. <http://www.upc-online.org>. USA.

January 13, 2012 at 2:32 pm | [Reply](#)



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6:10 pm ET January 12, 2012
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Mary Finelli

While I'm heartened by the progress (albeit glacially paced) that is being made to lessen the inhumaneness of egg production, the plain truth of the matter is that eggs cannot be commercially produced in a genuinely humane way. Male chicks are ground up alive shortly after hatching, hens are killed within a small fraction of their normal lifespan once their production decreases from the demanded rate, and the environment they exist in while alive is nothing as it should be to meet their natural behaviors. Alternative production methods (e.g., free range) are also rife with welfare problems.

The only way to truly keep from causing chickens -and all farmed animals- from immense and unnecessary suffering is to not consume them or their products (e.g., eggs and milk). Veganism is easier than ever, and more of an environmental imperative than ever. Fortunately, It's also a superior diet for human health – and the food is terrific!! See: <http://www.tryveg.com>

January 13, 2012 at 3:30 pm | [Reply](#)

Igor Purlantov

Free range is the way to go if you are going to eat eggs. It is shame how some of these animals are mistreated.

<http://www.igor-purlantov.org>

January 13, 2012 at 3:59 pm | [Reply](#)

Dr. Barnes

Singer's books are full of garbage and misrepresentation about what the human species needs to survive. But he doesn't want the human species to survive as its quite clear from his article in the New York Times admonishing our young people to spay or neuter themselves and then party down guilt free until the last human being dies out. This is a cult and nothing less and there is no science behind a strict vegan diet. Right now 12 million children die each year from lack of meat protein and here we are in one of the riches countries on this earth and a cult is pushing into law an enforced vegan diet which has already caused the death of 16 infants in this country and the UK. Note to vegetarians and vegans: ACTIVE B12 is found ONLY in animal products. B12 is the only vitamin that contains a trace element (cobalt), which is why it's called cobalamin. Cobalamin is produced in the gut of animals. It's the only vitamin we can't obtain from plants or sunlight. Plants don't need B12 so they don't store it.

A common myth perpetrated amongst vegetarians and vegans is that it's possible to get B12 from plant sources like seaweed, fermented soy, spirulina and brewers yeast. But plant foods said to contain B12 actually contain B12 analogs called cobamides that block intake of and increase the need for true B12.

This explains why studies consistently demonstrate that up to 50% of long-term vegetarians and 80% of vegans are deficient in B12.

The effects of B12 deficiency on kids are especially alarming. Studies have shown that kids raised until age 6 on a vegan diet are still B12 deficient even years after they start eating at least some animal products. In one study, the researchers found:

• a significant association between cobalamin [b12] status and performance on tests measuring fluid intelligence, spatial ability and short-term memory with formerly vegan kids scoring lower than omnivorous kids in each case.

The deficit in fluid intelligence is particularly troubling, the researchers said, because:

• it involves reasoning, the capacity to solve complex problems, abstract thinking ability and the ability to learn. Any defect in this area may have far-reaching consequences for individual functioning.

I recognize that there are many reasons why people choose to eat the way they do, and I respect people's right to make their own choices. I also know that, like all parents, vegetarians and vegans want the best for their children. This is why it's absolutely crucial for those that abstain from animal products to understand that there are no plant sources of B12 and that all vegans and most vegetarians should supplement with B12 from animal meat. This is especially important for vegetarian or vegan children or pregnant women, whose need for B12 is even greater than adults.

So you are a terrorist when you try to enforce your views on other human beings that cause them harm. You lie to the public, you lie to yourself and you do harm to not only fellow species, but to all the animals that you don't want born into this world as food for other species. Remember all animals even the great apes eat meat. You inflict harm upon your own species and all domestic species in zeal to all use of domestic animals. They cannot live without us nor we without them. This is so ignorant on so many fronts that like lemmings to the sea PeTA and HSUS have propagated this cult and lied to the public about real nutrition. Even to the point of telling people their own pets can be vegan they didn't care how many cats died on their vegan diet they sold to cult members. Wake up America and realize that these terrorist intend to end the human species that is their goal and no less. Animal protein is essential to all human beings and the egg is one of the best and least expensive sources, but these animal rights cult members want to make buying eggs so expensive you can't afford them. This is a cult and nothing less than a cult.

January 13, 2012 at 11:41 pm | [Reply](#)

C. Stefan

Dr. Barnes points out some very important facts that are generally being overlooked or oversimplified just to suit a political agenda. The inhumanity of animal treatment in intensive systems is being blown out of proportions by animal rights

activists and the real issue underlying animal welfare is the quality of the farming practices rather than the intensive systems themselves. Of course, it is much easier to sort out structure than to modify content and politically more convenient.

As a point of business and from a personal perspective, I consider the EU Directive 74/1999, which imposes better welfare standards and thereby forces farmers to improve not only welfare, but also efficiency levels and farm management conditions, gives the whole industry a welcome push into the 21st century by bringing it up to date technologically. However, as far as radical arguments in favour of producing only in free-range systems are concerned, they hardly represent a sustainable concept and risk depriving many consumers of one of the most quintessential nutritional products available on the market.

Additionally, it's worth noting that battery systems offer the best health conditions for chicken and consumers, due to the enhanced control and management procedures that can be applied. Wageningen University (Comparison of various housing systems for laying hens, 2009), one of the leading universities in the agricultural domain, reports that battery cages score better in regard to protection from parasites, viruses and infections, as well as mortality rates, animal fatigue, environmental conditions as well as working conditions. Surely, more natural behaviour is expressed in a free-range system, but seeing things in perspective and not reducing the debate to whether chicken (or other animals) are caged or not would be a start in leading a constructive dialogue that does not boil down to tags and labels.

One of the key elements in getting on this path of fair and balanced treatment of the matter would be for farms to openly show how they conduct business without compromising their biosecurity.

January 14, 2012 at 6:14 am | [Reply](#)

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