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'CAGE-FREE' EGGS: NOT ALL THEY'RE CRACKED UP TO BE?

By [Jennifer Wolcott](#) | Contributor to *The Christian Science Monitor*

The egg has long been known as "nature's perfect food." It's versatile, convenient, cleverly packaged, and was once accepted by many vegetarians as a form of nourishment that does no harm to animals. But in recent years that reputation has been under attack.

Chickens are perhaps the least protected of farm animals. All farm animals are exempt from the federal Animal Welfare Act, but unlike other types of livestock, chickens are also exempt from individual state laws prohibiting cruelty to animals and from the federal Humane Methods of Slaughter Act.

All of which sends up red flags to both careful cooks and ethical eaters. They are not only worried about the quality of the eggs they eat, but also with the quality of life of the chickens that produce those eggs. That's why a fraction of consumers select - and some spend more for - egg cartons that carry labels like "Animal Care Certified" or "cage free." They may not understand exactly what these labels mean, but they hope they offer some assurance that the eggs come from hens living in healthy and humane conditions.

But too often, say animal advocates, that is not the case.

The logo "Animal Care Certified" today appears on about 80 percent of egg cartons sold in American supermarkets. It means that the hens who laid the eggs were treated in accord with guidelines created by the United Egg Producers, the umbrella group which oversees most of the large, commercial egg producers in the US. But in August, the animal-advocacy organization Compassion Over Killing took issue with the "Animal Care Certified" logo.

"The logo is a scam," says Paul Shapiro, executive director of Compassion Over Killing. "It conveys the message that the birds are humanely cared for, which couldn't be further from the truth." The guidelines allow the hens to live in "battery cages" (wire cages stacked in tiers and lined in rows in large warehouses) with as many as eight hens in a cage of 67 square inches. There often is not room, animal advocates complain, for the birds even to flap their wings.

The UEP guidelines also allow the practice of trimming chicken's beaks to prevent excessive pecking, as well as "force molting," which involves underfeeding hens to extend their capacity to lay eggs.

But the standards represent a step forward for the industry, say the United Egg Producers (UEP). Just two years ago there were no standards governing hen care. The group says it hired animal scientists to shape its guidelines and now annually audits the egg producers who use the logo.

"There's nothing dishonest about saying our eggs are 'animal care certified,' " says Mitch Head, spokesman for the UEP. "Consumers can be assured that eggs produced under animal care guidelines have been carefully checked out according to the highest scientific standards."

But for chicken advocates like Karen Davis, the guidelines are not enough. Ms. Davis, founder of another animal-advocacy group, United Poultry Concerns, says chickens are "living beings with hearts and nervous systems, pain receptors like those of humans," and that they have certain instinctual needs such as the need for "privacy to lay eggs."

Both Shapiro and Davis omit eggs from their diets altogether. But for those consumers who can't forgo a morning omelet, they suggest choosing eggs from hens raised as close to their natural habitat as possible. Natural food stores usually carry these eggs - but even so, consumers must read the fine print.

"Organic certified," explains Shapiro, means hens had plenty of access to the outdoors, they ate organic feed, and they were not injected with antibiotics.

"Free range" means the chickens were allowed to roam outdoors. But "cage free" doesn't necessarily mean much in terms of quality of life for hens. Eggs labeled "cage free" often come from hens packed side by side in massive sheds, Shapiro says. Their access to the outdoors may be only through a tiny opening.

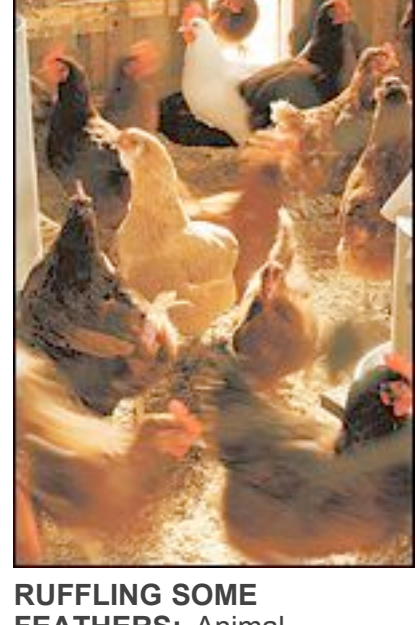
Yet in the US consumer demand for eggs from free-range chickens isn't strong enough to change practices, say some who monitor the market. The UEP's producers dominate the market for one reason, says Mr. Head: economics. "If consumers wanted free-range or cage-free eggs, that's what we'd give them. But so far, there's not much indication of that."

It's true that taking care for the the needs of hens adds to the cost of the eggs they produce. But there are consumers willing to pay more for a product they consider not only a more ethical choice but also superior in flavor.

Chef Andy Ayers buys 12 dozen to 20 dozen eggs a week from a local farm for Riddle's Penultimate Cafe & Wine Bar in St. Louis. The eggs are both free-range and organically fed, and for that, he pays a hefty price: \$3 per dozen. But he's not tempted to shop elsewhere. "These have big fat yolks that stand up twice as high as the whites in the pan," says Mr. Ayers. "They taste better."

In Europe, new standards requiring more humane treatment of hens will be in effect by 2012. Hens there will be required to have access to nesting boxes, scratch boxes, and dusting areas.

It's a trend some animal advocates hope will eventually make its way to the US as well.



RUFFLING SOME FEATHERS: Animal advocates argue that hens have basic needs for privacy and space to flap their wings. JOHN NORDELL - STAFF

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