



PhotoCredit: Brakefield, Tom

FACTORY FARMING: CRUELTY, BIODIVERSITY LOSS AND DISEASE

BY XARENI PACHECO EHRHARDT

March 2025

Throughout history, humans have maintained a complex and evolving relationship with farm animals. From the early domestication of animals for agricultural purposes to modern industrial farming systems, our interactions with these creatures have shaped our societies, economies, and cultural beliefs. The domestication process, which began around 10,000–17,000 years ago (depending on the species), allowed humans to harness animals for farming, transportation, and companionship. This marked a significant shift in our relationship with them, as they became integral to our development as a species.

Traditional farming practices gradually gave way to industrialized systems designed to maximize efficiency and productivity. Today, industrial farm animal production is dominated by large corporations that control every aspect of the process, prioritising profit above all else.

This has led to economic consolidation and vertical integration, resulting in animals being crammed into tight spaces, deprived of their natural behaviours, and subjected to immense suffering. To maximise output, growth-promoting antibiotics are used, and animals are fed concentrated feedstuffs grown far away, rather than being allowed to graze on pastures.



PhotoCredit: Lissy Jayne, dairy industry 2019/ We Animals

Every aspect of their lives, from breeding to living conditions, is tightly controlled. While this approach has resulted in an abundance of cheap meat, eggs, and dairy products, the hidden costs are substantial, including animal cruelty, human rights violations, environmental destruction, increased risk of zoonotic diseases, negative impacts on rural communities, reduced food diversity, and the loss of wildlife habitats.

Over time, our understanding and treatment of farm animals have also evolved. Factory farming has sparked concerns about animal welfare, environmental impact, and ethical considerations. As a result, the public and consumers increasingly demand transparency and accountability in the food industry. Furthermore, scientific research has shed light on the cognitive abilities, emotions, and social behaviours of farm animals, challenging the notion that they are mere commodities. This growing body of knowledge has fuelled discussions about the ethical implications of our treatment of these sentient beings.

Public health researchers and governmental institutions, including the United Nations, have recently turned their attention to factory farming. The ethical consensus among critics is overwhelmingly against the practice, deeming it morally unjustifiable in its current form.

The primary basis for these critiques centres on animal welfare and their inherent moral rights, but many also highlight the environmental consequences—such as greenhouse gas emissions, soil erosion, water pollution and scarcity, ocean dead zones, depletion of natural resources, and wildlife extinction—as well as the human health repercussions, including increased risks of diabetes, cancer, heart disease, osteoporosis, allergic reactions, and inflammatory disorders.

As discussions continue, it becomes increasingly evident that factory farming's ethical dilemmas demand urgent attention and action.

Farm animals, like non-human animals more broadly, often fall victim to the same dehumanising tendencies that have historically been applied to marginalised human groups. It is disheartening to witness how we strip animals of their inherent worth by denying their cognitive abilities, emotions, and individuality while disregarding moral considerations towards them. We must acknowledge the immense responsibility we bear for their well-being, respect, and survival. As philosopher Tom Regan famously stated:

"The fate of animals is in our hands."



PhotoCredit: Victoria de Martigny, 2023 / We Animals



"... there are times, and these not infrequent, when tears come to my eyes when I see, or read, or hear of the wretched plight of animals in the hands of humans. Their pain, their suffering, their loneliness, their innocence, their death. Anger. Rage. Pity. Sorrow. Disgust. The whole creation groans under the weight of the evil we humans visit upon these mute, powerless creatures. It is our hearts, not just our heads, that call for an end to it all, that demand of us that we overcome, for them, the habits and forces behind their systematic oppression. All great movements, it is written, go through three stages: ridicule, discussion, adoption. It is the realization of this third stage, adoption, that requires both our passion and our discipline, our hearts and our heads. The fate of animals is in our hands..." — Regan, T. (2013)

References:

- Driscoll, C. A., Macdonald, D. W., & O'Brien, S. J.** (2009). From wild animals to domestic pets, an evolutionary view of domestication. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 106(supplement_1), 9971-9978.
- Fisher, M.** (2019). *Animal welfare science, husbandry and ethics: the evolving story of our relationship with farm animals*. 5m Books Ltd.
- Marchese, A. and Hovorka, A.,** 2022. Zoonoses transfer, factory farms and unsustainable human-animal relations. *Sustainability*, 14(19), p.12806.
- Marcus, E.** (2005). *Meat Market: animals, ethics, & money* (pp. 20-21). Boston: Brio Press.
- Regan, T.** (2004). The case for animal rights. *Advances in animal welfare science* 1986/87, 179-189.
- Regan, T.** (2013). 'The Case for Animal Rights'. In *Ethics, Humans and Other Animals* (pp. 179-188). Routledge.
- Richards, R.J. and Richards, E.L.,** 2011. Cheap meat: how factory farming is harming our health, the environment, and the economy. *Ky. J. Equine Agric. & Nat. Resources L.*, 4, p.31.
- Rossi, J., & Garner, S. A.** (2014). Industrial farm animal production: A comprehensive moral critique. *Journal of agricultural and environmental ethics*, 27, 479-522.

