

Op-Ed: Thinking of giving up red meat?

Half measures may end up increasing animal suffering



4-week-old Leghorn chicks in Valley Center, CA. (Los Angeles Times)

By Peter Singer and Karen Dawn

To animal protection advocates, a pledge to eat less meat is good news. Even a small step like Meatless Mondays is generally better than nothing. All too often, however, aspiring ethical eaters choose a favored animal or two to exclude from their diet, without actually reducing their total animal consumption. Despite good intentions, they may end up increasing animal suffering.

Many people, for example, swear off pigs and cows but continue to eat chickens and fish. Perhaps they categorize animals into those they eat and those they keep as pets;

mammals, with their fur and their "windows to the soul" framed in long lashes, may seem more like the latter.

Replacing pigs and cows with birds and fish, though, usually leads to the slaughter of many more animals, because, with a few exceptions, birds and fish are smaller. If you were to eat a pound of beef a day — say a huge steak or four beef patties — you might take a year to consume a single animal. If you were instead to eat a daily pound of chicken or salmon, you might eat hundreds of animals per year.

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Birds and fish are not demonstrably less sentient than mammals. People who have rescued turkeys report that when treated as pets they respond as such; they enjoy attention, affection and mental stimulation. Anybody who has spent real time with backyard hens knows that they have individual personalities. And while many of us were taught that fish have memories of only a few seconds, scientific experiments have shown that they can remember the location of a hole in a net many months after first learning about it. They can also recognize faces — one another's and ours. Divers tell stories about, and have filmed themselves petting, friendly Groupers who swim up to them.

Few people are aware of the level of suffering experienced by a single bird or fish killed for human consumption, which is shocking even before that suffering is multiplied by the hundreds a person might eat in place of a cow or pig over the course of a year.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture interprets the **Federal Humane Slaughter Act** as not covering birds. That means that 95% of land animals slaughtered for food in this country are excluded. They may have coverage under individual state laws, but that is far from sufficient. They are commonly thrown around, stuffed into shackles, and have their throats slit while conscious. When killing blades miss their necks, they are tossed alive into the scalding water of defeathering tanks. A recent **Washington Post** article reported that approximately 1 million turkeys and chickens are boiled to death every year.

While the differences between the nervous systems of fish and other animals has long been used as the basis for the argument that fish do not feel pain, recent experiments have left no doubt that they do. Fish who have irritants injected into their lips will rub their lips incessantly against their tank walls — unless those irritants are accompanied by pain relievers. So when a fish spends three days on a hook attached to the mile long line of a fishing vessel, that fish is probably spending three days in agony — and that's before the fish is hauled onto a deck to die slowly of suffocation.

Marine mammal admirers may not know that dolphins, sea turtles and whales are killed by those fishing lines and caught in fishing nets. Further, the crisis of overfishing that depletes our oceans robs fish-eating animals of their food. Dead penguins wash up on coastlines, their bellies empty. When the fish are gone, the animals who depend on them cannot order tofu instead.

Crueler still than a diet that simply kills animals is one that also causes them egregious daily torment. In the U.S., most laying hens are still kept in battery cages, each hen crammed with four or five others in a space so small she is unable to stand up straight or spread her wings. She will live for at least a year in conditions worse than those that most of us find hard to handle on a five-hour flight across the country.

Though conditions are slightly better for hens in California, where traditional battery cages have been banned, the law does not require that hens be released from cages, only that the cages give them enough room to stand up and spread their wings. They may still live in stacks, showered by the excrement of the hens above them, and deprived of the ability to fulfill their natural instincts — to sunbathe, dustbathe and raise their young.

Even cage-free eggs generally come from hens who live in massive barns, choked by ammonia fumes. Though hens raised on pasture, the highest welfare standard, enjoy better conditions, they produce a negligible percentage of eggs in the United States. As there are no federal laws

regulating their slaughter, their lives can end in horror. "Spent hens" may be thrown live into ditches and buried by bulldozers.

We recognize that people may avoid red meat on environmental grounds. Research suggests that pound for pound chicken is responsible for less environmental degradation than beef. Though some people may snicker about the impact of methane, or "cow farts," the warming potential of methane is 30 times that of carbon dioxide. Nevertheless, a diet that is responsible for hundreds of times more suffering is not made ethical by producing a lower level of greenhouse gas emissions.

Anybody who gives up red meat on environmental grounds should also consider the methane emissions of dairy, as well as its local pollution. California's San Joaquin Valley, responsible for a fifth of the nation's milk production, has some of the worst air quality in the country. And dairy has built-in suffering. Mammals do not give milk until they give birth. People who work in the dairy industry report that mother cows will bellow for days for calves who have been carted off to veal crates. Veal calves are the waste product of the dairy industry.

We understand that most people are not yet ready to eschew all animal products and embrace a vegan lifestyle. But while substituting one meat or animal product for another may do more harm than good, making half of your meals plant-based is a superb half-measure. It's not hard. We aren't the only ones who think that Just Mayo's plant-

based mayonnaise tastes just as good as Hellman's regular. And last year, when Whole Foods mistakenly sold plant-based "chick'n" in its regular chicken salad, not a single customer complained.

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