

The Opinion Pages

Opinionator

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Some Animals Are More Equal Than Others

By Mark Bittman March 15, 2011 8:30 pm

Mark Bittman on food and all things related.

It's time to take a look at the line between "pet" and "animal." When the ASPCA sends an agent to the home of a Brooklyn family to arrest one of its members for allegedly killing a hamster, something is wrong.

That "something" is this: we protect "companion animals" like hamsters while largely ignoring what amounts to the torture of chickens and cows and pigs. In short, if I keep a pig as a pet, I can't kick it. If I keep a pig I intend to sell for food, I can pretty much torture it. State laws known as "Common Farming Exemptions" allow industry — rather than lawmakers — to make any practice legal as long as it's common. "In other words," as Jonathan Safran Foer, the author of "Eating Animals," wrote me via e-mail, "the industry has the power to define cruelty. It's every bit as crazy as giving burglars the power to define trespassing."

Meanwhile, there are pet police. So when 19-year-old Monique Smith slammed her sibling's hamster on the floor and killed it, as she may have done in a fit of rage last week, an ASPCA agent — there are 18 of them, busily responding to animal cruelty calls in the five boroughs and occasionally beyond — arrested her. (The charges were later dropped, though Ms. Smith spent a night in jail at Rikers Island.)

In light of the way most animals are treated in this country, I'm pretty sure that ASPCA agents don't need to spend their time in Brooklyn defending rodents.

In fact, there's no rationality to be found here. Just a few blocks from Ms. Smith's

home, along the M subway line, the city routinely is poisoning rodents as quickly and futilely as it possibly can, though rats can be pets also. But that's hardly the point. This is: we "process" (that means kill) nearly 10 billion animals annually in this country, approximately one-sixth of the world's total.

Many if not most of these animals are raised (or not, since probably a couple of hundred million are killed at birth) industrially, in conditions that the philosopher Peter Singer and others have compared to concentration camps. Might we more usefully police those who keep egg-laying hens in cages so small the birds can't open their wings, for example, than anger-management-challenged young people accused of hamstercide?

Yet Ms. Smith was charged as a felon, because in New York (and there are similar laws in other states) if you kick a dog or cat or hamster or, I suppose, a guppy, enough to "cause extreme physical pain" or do so "in an especially depraved or sadistic manner" you may be guilty of aggravated cruelty to animals, as long as you do this "with no justifiable purpose."

But thanks to Common Farming Exemptions, as long as I "raise" animals for food and it's done by my fellow "farmers" (in this case, manufacturers might be a better word), I can put around 200 million male chicks a year through grinders (graphic video here), castrate — mostly without anesthetic — 65 million calves and piglets a year, breed sick animals (don't forget: more than half a billion eggs were recalled last summer, from just two Iowa farms) who in turn breed antibiotic-resistant bacteria, allow those sick animals to die without individual veterinary care, imprison animals in cages so small they cannot turn around, skin live animals, or kill animals en masse to stem disease outbreaks.

All of this is legal, because we will eat them.

We have "justifiable purposes": pleasure (or, at this point, habit, because eating is hardly a pleasure if you do it in your car, or in 10 minutes), convenience — there are few things more filling per dollar than a cheeseburger — and of course corporate profits. We should be treating animals better and raising fewer of them; this would naturally reduce our consumption. All in all, a better situation for us, the animals, the world.

Arguing for the freedom to eat as much meat as you want is equivalent to arguing for treating farm animals as if they could not feel pain. Yet no one would defend Ms. Smith's cruel action because it was a pet and therefore not born to be put through living hell.

Is it really that bad? After all, a new video from Smithfield, the world's largest pork producer, makes industrial pig-raising seem like a little bit of heaven. But undercover videos from the Humane Society of the United States tell quite a different story, and a repulsive one. It also explains why we saw laws proposed by friends of agribusiness in both Iowa and Florida in recent weeks that would ban making such videos: the truth hurts, especially if you support the status quo.

Our fantasy is that until the industrial era domesticated animals were treated decently. Maybe that's true, and maybe it isn't; but certainly they weren't turned out by the tens of thousands as if they were widgets.

We're finally seeing some laws that take the first steps toward generally ameliorating cruelty to farm animals, and it's safe to say that most of today's small farmers and even some larger ones raise animals humanely. These few, at least, are treated with as much respect as the law believes we should treat a hamster.

For the majority of non-pets, though, it's tough luck.

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