

Factory Farming vs. Alternative Farming: The Humane Hoax

By Hope Bohanec

Animal agriculture is a business of making money on the bodies of other sentient beings. This can never be free of a fundamental insensitivity towards the victims. Just as one cannot own humans and traffic their bodies for profit in a humane way, so it is impossible to humanely profit from the bodies of other animals. – Hope Bohanec, author of The Ultimate Betrayal: Is There Happy Meat?

Emergence of the Factory Farming “Alternative”

For most of my adult life, I have been engaging in conversations about animals raised and killed for their meat, milk and eggs. These conversations haven't changed much over the last 25 years. I get the same, tired questions about protein and desert islands and plants feeling pain.

But recently, something has shifted. In the last few years, people have started to say things like, “Oh, but I buy free-range eggs” or “My meat isn't from a factory farm, it's local.” It's almost as if all concern about the treatment of animals has been pacified by these new and improved “alternative” animal products.

By purchasing these products, people feel absolved from the cruelty inherent in animal agriculture. They feel there is an alternative now at the farmer's markets and in the “slow food” movement and if they just pay a little extra money, they can “have their meat and eat it too.” Consumers are being lulled into a complacency where they think the animals are now happy and this new way of farming actually benefits the environment. They have been led to believe that all is well in the mythical world of humane animal agriculture; and that is exactly what the producers of these products want them to believe.

Is the “Alternative” Encouraging a Return to Meat Eating?

The trend is quite popular in my little liberal community of beautiful Sonoma County, California just north of the Golden Gate Bridge. We were lucky enough to have a good size, all vegetarian natural foods store that has been a haven for vegetarians and vegans since the

70s. It was a joy to shop there and not have to avert your eyes from bloody muscles on display or wince at the pungent odor of dead marine life. Many of us went out of our way and would pass up one or two Whole Foods just to shop there.

Recently, while humming around the store for my organic veggies and vegan ice cream, an enthusiastic employee told me they were opening a second store. I was thrilled at first, but the excitement soon took an unexpected turn when I learned there would be a meat counter. How could this be? The 4th word of the Market's mission statement was “vegetarian.” I learned that because they were able to source “local, humane” meats, and there was such a high demand for these products, they had changed their mission statement. After almost four decades of vegetarianism, they had decided to sell meat. The vegetarian community felt completely betrayed.

But we are not the only ones being betrayed. The farmed animals caught in this changing industry are the true victims. It is not the few differences between alternative production and factory farming that matter, but the startling similarities.

What Exactly is the Alternative to Factory Farming?

When we see a product with one of these new labels: humane, free-range, grass-fed, sustainable, there is probably little difference between this operation and a conventional producer. Here's what may be different. The scale of the operation is likely smaller and the animals are perhaps not in total confinement, such as cages, and they may have some access to the outdoors.



A typical “cage-free” operation houses 48,000 hens.



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Some people think that the companies producing products with alternative labels are heroically defying factory farming norms and are the saviors of our food supply. The disheartening truth is that there is little distinction; the similarities far outweigh the differences. Most of the other horrors a farmed animal endures in animal agriculture still apply to any of these alternative labels.

For example, when someone buys eggs labeled “cage-free” or “free-range,” they likely came from hens who aren’t in battery cages but who are still overcrowded in miserable, windowless warehouses where the stench of ammonia is overwhelming. They are still painfully debeaked, brutally handled, and they still go to a terrifying slaughter at a young age. And the babies still come from the harsh and heartless hatcheries where the male chicks are cruelly killed by the millions soon after hatching, as they are considered a waste product of the egg industry.

When someone buys dairy products with an “organic” or “humane” label, the cows were perhaps able to go outside for some of their life, but they were still artificially inseminated, kept pregnant their entire short life and were milked well beyond what was ever intended for their bodies naturally. The cow’s baby calf was still taken away soon after birth, never to nuzzle her mother, drink from her udder, or frolic in a field. If the calf is male, he is worthless to the dairy industry and is sold at auction to be killed for veal or some other form of meat. If the operation is organic, sick and diseased cows linger untreated so the milk is not “tainted” with needed medications.

No matter the label, no matter the scale, commercially “farming” an animal for her flesh, milk or eggs is factory farming. If a bird is hatched into this world in a sterile metal drawer without the comfort of her mother hen and a soft nest, that is factory farming. If a calf is ripped from his mother at birth and kept separate from her and other cows, alone and frightened, chained and unloved – that is factory farming. If an animal has her beak burned off, her tail cut off, his genitals ripped out – that is factory farming. If an animal is hung upside down with his throat sliced open – that is factory farming.



Whatever the label, all animal product consumption comes down to this.

Indeed, I would encourage the animal activist community not to use the term “factory farming” anymore because it implies that there is some “humane” farming alternative somewhere that counters the large-scale, industrial operations. By using the term “factory farming,” animal activists have inadvertently contributed to a demand for “alternative” animal products. This is what we have been hearing in the shifting rhetoric of apologists for the animal agricultural industry when they say, “I only buy . . .”

Is Anti-Factory Farming Really Pro-Environment?

In these more recent conversations, I’m also hearing people say, “But it’s better for the environment” or “it’s more sustainable,” as if the ecological concerns trump the ethical. Many believe that a smaller operation or an animal having a little more living space is somehow better for the planet. However, this is a case of green-washing – labeling a product to make the consumer believe it’s better for the environment when in fact there is little or no difference from its conventional counterpart. Some cases of alternative labels are even worse. For example, grass-fed cows can produce 50 to 60 percent more greenhouse gas emissions than their grain-fed cousins. They may also drink more water because their activity level is higher than that of cows who are penned and force fed a diet of grains for which the body of a cow is unsuited.

To give all farmed animals the space they need to have even a semblance of a natural life, we would have to destroy millions more acres of forests, prairies and wetlands than we are already ruining. There is not enough land on the planet, or even two planets, to free-range hundreds of billions of pigs, cows, sheep, goats, turkeys, ducks, and chickens to feed billions of human beings. We would need closer to five planet Earths. Free-ranging animals for food can never be more than a specialty market for a few elite buyers. For the planet, our own health, and especially for the sake of the animals, we have to stop eating them and stealing their eggs. We have to stop drinking their milk. Today is a good day to start.

Hope Bohanec is the author of The Ultimate Betrayal: Is There Happy Meat? Order Hope’s illuminating book in soft cover and e-book on Amazon or Barnes & Noble. You’ll be glad you did!

