ANIMAL WELFARE

Cultural war over birds

Activists condemn S.F. markets’ sale of live poultry for food

By Jessica Kwong

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

For two decades, Raymond Young has set up his poultry stall to sell live chickens at United Nations Plaza every Wednesday and Sunday before the crack of dawn. His steady stream of customers are mostly Chinese.

But in April, another group of early risers started showing up not to buy but to block sales.

“Live animals don’t belong in bags!” read a banner that animal rights activists, most of them vegan, held beside dozens of Chinese waiting at 6 a.m. Wednesday for Young’s workers to set up and begin selling.

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Photos by Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

Vendor Jayce Benton prepares a game bird at the Civic Center Heart of the City Farmers’ Market.
A customer carries live poultry in bags past protesters at the Civic Center Heart of the City Farmers' Market in San Francisco.

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Protesters blast sales of live birds at markets

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“The cruelty is very obvious and severe,” said Andrew Zollman, 43, organizer of LGBT Compassion’s Live Markets Campaign. “Animals are held and crammed tightly into paper bags and carried around often screaming and yelling horrifically — it’s just chilling to the bone.”

Seeking to halt sales

Since April 2009, Zollman’s group has set up a cultural conflict by making it a mission to halt the live poultry sales.

While his group opposes live chicken sales in Chinatown and factory farms, it has focused on the Heart of the City Farmers’ Market because it is subsidized by San Francisco, takes place in a public space and is the only market of its kind that allows these sales, Zollman said.

His group has video-recorded squawking birds and their feces and, in the past several months, set up a TV at the market replaying the footage. It has contacted city officials with Animal Care and Control, the Department of Public Health and the district attorney’s office. More recently, it tried to block poultry trucks and workers from setting up their stalls.

Customers in the constantly flowing line Wednesday ignored the activists’ signs and brochures, printed in Chinese and English.

A matter of culture

“My mother thinks these chickens taste better,” said San Francisco resident Sharon Guo, 15, walking away with four chickens. “They’re more fresh, and maybe it’s healthier.” Young’s sales are down about 30 percent in the past six months, according to his daughter Christina Ly, 25. But what bothers her and other vendors most is the protesters’ presence.

“I’m tired of seeing them here. I just wish they’d give it up and go eat their fruits and vegetables,” said market manager Christine Adams.

Ly also sees the protests as a cultural attack in a city where the most recent census data show 1 in 5 residents is Chinese.

“They have their beliefs, and we have our beliefs,” Ly said while conducting a nonstop exchange of cash for chickens.

“They believe it’s predatory, but this is a tradition. This is people’s culture.”
**Law's exception for poultry**

Young’s stall is popular because while live chickens are sold in Chinatown, the prices are higher. Young sells two chickens for $11.50, while Ming’s Poultry on Grant Avenue in Chinatown sells two for $15.

It’s customary in China to buy live poultry and kill and cook it at home, said Donna Chan, community organizer for Chinatown Community Development Center.

“A lot of seniors go to the market and carry the chickens on buses,” she said. “They prefer that over getting frozen chicken from Safeway.”

Prompted by the activists, Animal Care and Control has checked on Young’s operation at least half a dozen times in the past 18 months. There have been some instances of overcrowding of birds, lack of water and chickens missing beaks or struggling in bags, and some chickens have been confiscated or euthanized, said Director Rebecca Katz.

Animal Care and Control and activists brought these concerns before the district attorney, but the state statute on animal cruelty lays out a “clear exception” for poultry, said Erica Derryck, spokeswoman for the district attorney’s office. “It’s not a question of us exercising some kind of discretion,” Derryck said. “Barring change in that statute, there isn’t anything we would be able to do in terms of prosecution.”

**Keeping it clean**

Young and Adams attended a Department of Public Health meeting with Zollman in November, and “sanitation issues have improved,” said Lisa O’Malley, principal environmental health inspector for the city.

The market’s other live poultry vendor, Bullfeathers Quail, also complied with Department of Public Health notices to keep the area clean, O’Malley said. But activists don’t leave owner Jayce Benton alone.

“The ones caught and sold here are treated more humanely than those at slaughterhouses sitting in cages for hours,” Benton said. “We’re a pittance compared to them.”

While state law prevents any intervention, activist Alex Felsinger, 25, said he will continue to protest until the vendors’ permits are revoked. It isn’t about attacking Chinese culture, he added.

“It baffles me that we would come out twice a week motivated by hate; we are motivated by compassion,” Felsinger said.

“These are live animals with feelings and emotions — it’s no different than stuffing puppies into paper bags.”

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Donna Chan, community organizer for Chinatown Community Development Center
Andrew Zollman and other activists protest the sale of live animals at the Civic Center Heart of the City Farmers’ Market.