The True Cost of Christmas

A special report by the Vegetarian Society highlighting the plight of animals at this time of year.

www.costofchristmas.org
Christmas is typically a time of year when family, friends and loved ones gather and spend time together – enjoying food, drink and exchanging gifts.

Traditionally, this is a time for peace and goodwill to all mankind – but what about the animals, the environment and your health?

This report explains what is really behind our seasonal festivities. Nowadays, the vast majority of people in the UK sit down on Christmas day to tuck into a roast turkey (or other bird/joint of meat) with all the trimmings, including sausage and bacon, alongside roast potatoes and other vegetables which may have been cooked in goose fat. According to those organisations promoting turkey meat, Christmas just wouldn't be Christmas without a traditional roast turkey! However, it is thought that Edward VII made eating turkey fashionable at Christmas and its consumption was a luxury until the 1950s when refrigerators became commonplace.¹
The True Cost of Christmas

Around 17 million turkeys are slaughtered in the United Kingdom each year, with approximately 10 million of these killed solely to meet the Christmas demand.

Given the opportunity, turkeys will naturally cover a wide area eating vegetation, seeds and grains. Wild turkeys are strong fliers with a wing span of six feet, typically roosting high up in trees. The four main types of turkey production consist of conventional enclosed housing (broiler sheds), barns, free range and organic systems, with a number of turkeys kept for breeding to provide chicks to rear for meat production.

**BREEDING AND REARING**

Parent or adult birds experience a number of welfare problems having been selectively bred to produce huge amounts of breast meat. Their large size and broad breasts have caused male breeding turkeys (stags) to suffer from degenerative hip disorders resulting in chronic pain. Artificial insemination (AI) is routine due to the fact many birds are unable to mate naturally. This procedure involves the males being repeatedly 'milked' for semen collection, whilst females (hens) have to endure the process of being caught and inseminated by tube/syringe. The surplus chicks reared (referred to as ‘hatchery waste’) are killed by a number of permitted methods.

**HOUSING**

The majority (90%) of turkeys reared for their meat are kept in windowless sheds, with some containing as many as 25,000 birds. Heating, ventilation and lighting are all automatically controlled. The stocking density for broiler-type housing of turkeys is 260cm²/kg, and as the birds grow and approach slaughter age they become more tightly packed together. Broiler sheds typically contain flocks of around 10,000 birds housed on litter (usually wood shavings). The litter is not changed during the turkey’s time in the shed and so becomes increasingly covered in the birds’ faeces. Turkeys do not scratch around in the litter in the way that chickens will and this

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means the condition of the litter deteriorates more quickly. Many turkeys die in these sheds every year, including young birds that never learn to reach food and water points (these birds are known as starve-outs). Turkeys reared in barns are slightly less densely stocked compared with conventional sheds (around 410cm²/kg). Barns are large sheds with more natural lighting and ventilation. As these are not often purpose built for rearing birds, bad ventilation, draughts and heat stress can all cause problems. Due to a lack of environmental stimulation and overcrowding, aggression and cannibalism often have to be controlled in these barns by de-beaking.

**ROUTINE MUTILATIONS**

Turkeys have to endure a number of routine mutilations, such as beak trimming and toe cutting. Beak trimming is mostly carried out to prevent or control behaviour which could result in injury. It involves slicing off about one-third of the beak, usually with a red hot blade when the turkey is around five days old (breeders may be de-beaked again at 14 to 18 weeks). This can be extremely painful for the bird and studies on de-beaked chickens have shown pain to be prolonged and perhaps indefinite.

**OTHER WELFARE CONSIDERATIONS**

The selective breeding for rapid weight gain, along with the use of high nutrient feed, has meant that many turkeys are unable to support their own weight. This leads to lameness and leg/hip joint infections. Lameness may also be the result of foot ulceration caused by turkeys having to stand on wet, dirty litter.

**TRANSPORT**

Before turkeys are slaughtered some will have to face being caught and transported packed into crates, all of which can cause considerable pain and distress. Turkeys are considerably larger and stronger than chickens and can be nervous and easily frightened.

**SLAUGHTER**

The natural lifespan of a wild turkey is around 10 years, but they are normally slaughtered between 9 and 24 weeks old, depending on the size of bird being produced. In 2011, 16.9 million turkeys were slaughtered in the UK (15.2 million in 2010). The majority of birds are killed in large, semi-automated slaughterhouses. Turkeys are removed from their crates and hung upside down by their legs from shackles on a moving line. At slaughter, turkeys can weigh anything from 5-28kg and the pain caused to heavy birds whilst they hang in shackles is considerable. This pain is worsened by the fact that many of the birds, and especially the larger ones, will suffer from diseased hip joints. The shackles carry them to an electrically charged stunning water bath through which the bird’s head is dragged in order to render the bird unconscious and insensible to pain before its neck is cut. For a bird to be stunned, rather than receiving an electric shock, the electric current must pass through its brain before contacting any other part of the body. As turkeys have a large wingspan, their wings hang lower than their heads and so these are in danger of entering the stunning bath before their heads. In these cases the birds are not stunned prior to neck cutting. Due to the additional demand for turkeys at Christmas, ‘Seasonal Slaughterhouses’ are used and many turkeys will be killed by having their necks dislocated. Research has shown that this does not usually have an immediate effect and therefore unconsciousness may not be instantaneous.
What does Christmas mean for animals?

Around 9.8 million pigs were slaughtered in the UK in 2011. Pigs are reared primarily for bacon, ham, pork and sausages. Over 70% of pigs in the UK are reared under very intensive conditions, being closely confined indoors for their entire lives.

Pigs are highly inquisitive, social, intelligent animals which originally lived in woodlands, foraging for nuts, seeds, roots and grubs. They will not soil their resting area and the myth that pigs are somehow dirty comes from their wallowing in wet mud. As pigs do not sweat they do this to cool down in hot weather (also protecting them from sunburn) and to rid themselves of pests and irritations.

BREEDING AND REARING
Sows are first mated when they are six to eight months old, with the majority of sows in the UK being serviced by artificial insemination (AI). Pregnancy lasts approximately four months and a sow will give birth (farrow) to an average litter of 10-12 piglets. These are prematurely weaned after a minimum of 21 days (weaning would naturally occur at 12-14 weeks) and a week later the sow will be serviced again. The average number of pigs reared per sow was 23 in 2011. Sows produce around four to seven litters before they become exhausted and are slaughtered after three to five years for sausages, pork pies and other low-quality products. They spend at least two thirds of their lives in pregnancy.

PIGLETs AND YOUNG PIGS
After weaning, the majority of young pigs are reared in groups in small pens (batch pens) or metal cages. Those with slatted or perforated floors without bedding often cause injury to legs and feet. Under The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 the amount of unobstructed floor area available to each pig ranges from 0.15m² (10kg pig) to 1m² (pigs over 110kg).

SOWs
There were around 432,000 breeding sows in the UK in 2011. The majority of these are kept indoors. Sows used to be confined in sow stalls. These are barred stalls barely larger than the sow so she is unable to turn around.
Sow stalls are still commonly used outside the UK, but an EU-wide ban will come fully into force 1 January 2013. Housed on concrete or slatted floors with no bedding, intensive farming systems mean that pigs cannot display their natural tendencies and instead show unnatural behaviours such as tail biting, bar biting and head shaking. The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 state that a pig should be able to turn around, stand up, lie down and rest without difficulty. This, however, does not apply when the sow is moved to a farrowing crate.

**Farrowing Crates**
A week before intensively kept sows give birth they are moved into farrowing crates – metal crates which are barely larger than the sow itself. The sow’s movement is severely restricted and she is unable to turn around. Any attempt at movement means the sow will unavoidably rub against the crate bars causing sores, abrasions and swellings. Sows will remain in these crates for three to four weeks until the piglets are weaned. The strong instinct to build a nest (out of natural materials such as grass or straw) is frustrated. Close confinement can cause muscle weakness, lameness and inflammatory swellings of the joints.

Farrowing crates are used as it is claimed that piglets would otherwise be crushed by the sow lying on them. However, when the sows are prevented from maneuvering and lying down carefully, piglets are in danger of being crushed by the sow clumsily dropping down. Studies have found piglet mortality is no different between crated and un-crated systems. One study compared the behaviour of sows housed indoors (farrowing crates) and outdoors in paddocks have shown that if the environment allows then pigs will spend hours making a nest to give birth to their young in. In comparison, confined sows with no access to material to perform natural nesting has shown negative effects on behaviour, such as psychological stress, reduced piglet survival and the savaging of piglets.

**Mutilations**
Pens are typically overcrowded, poorly lit and without bedding. Pigs can become bored and aggressive with tail biting and excessive fighting occurring. Piglets therefore often have their teeth clipped and tails docked. Piglets are generally not castrated in the UK as they are slaughtered before sexual maturity. All of these procedures may be performed in the first few days after birth without a vet being present. The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 state that if the piglet is older than one week then these should be carried out under anesthetic by a veterinary surgeon.

**Other Welfare Considerations**
Intensive farming methods have lead to increased disease problems, particularly amongst piglets. Viral pneumonia, meningitis, swine vesicular disease, blue-ear disease, scours, infertility and diarrhoea are just some of the diseases that can affect pigs.

**Slaughter**
Pigs are usually slaughtered around four to seven months. Pigs intended for pork are usually slaughtered one to two months younger than pigs for bacon. The natural lifespan of a pig is 10-15 years. Around 9.8 million pigs were slaughtered in the UK in 2011. Pigs are stunned first then killed by being shackled and hoisted before having the blood vessels in their throat slit (sticking). The animal then bleeds to death. Pigs are usually stunned electrically – an electric current is applied by means of two electrodes in the form of tongs. These are placed on either side of the brain, usually either side of the neck behind the ears so that sufficient current is passed through. The current should induce a state of immediate epilepsy (electropleptic shock) in the brain, during which time the animal is unconscious. Factors which should be taken into account regarding the welfare of pigs at slaughter include operator error as a result of high throughput, tiredness, insufficient instructions, animal position and inadequate knives.
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Geese

GOOSE FAT

The keeping of geese for their fat, grease and feathers dates back as far as 2500BC when ancient Egyptians kept them for food and fattened them deliberately. The 1930s and 40s saw goose fat being used for medicinal purposes, whereby goose fat was applied as a poultice for chest colds, and sore throats were treated with a spoonful of ‘goose grease’. It is thought that the use of goose fat in cooking came about in the late 1950s. Despite vegetable and nut oils being widely available, and a much healthier cooking option, goose fat has been imported from France since the late 80s. In recent years it has been promoted by ‘celebrity chefs’ as an essential Christmas cooking ingredient and is now widely available. It is difficult to know whether goose fat has come from birds used for foie gras, a cruel ‘delicacy’ created by force feeding ducks and geese until their livers swell to many times the normal size.

WELFARE CONSIDERATIONS

Geese are bred for their meat, feathers and fat, with around 15 million geese and ducks killed in the UK in 2011. A report produced in May 2009 by the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) highlighted welfare at slaughter or killing. It describes how geese are often inverted and shackled unsupported prior to pre-stunning and throat cutting, even though this is contrary to the good practice described in the Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock. The report also mentions that pre-stun shocks must be painful and the wingtips of larger birds, such as geese, hang below the head leading to problems in the electrical water-baths where the birds will not receive adequate stunning. It is permitted for geese to be slaughtered in the same line used originally for ducks, despite the significant difference in their size.
‘Hidden’ ingredients

Christmas is a time when typically more food and drink is consumed, and numerous gifts exchanged. Some of these may contain ‘hidden’ animal derived ingredients such as animal fats and other by-products of slaughter. The Vegetarian Society provides numerous useful information sheets, on various topics, such as clothing (e.g. leather/fur), alcohol (what’s used to make your wine, etc) and other stumbling blocks. These can all be found on our website www.vegsoc.org/veggieaware.

Why animals matter

What happens to animals ultimately depends upon how we value or see them, and, therefore, where we place them in our society. Animals are capable of experiencing emotions, whether these are positive or negative. From the everyday experience humans have of observing animals, it is apparent that they feel pain, hunger, thirst, heat, cold, fear, anger and that they are also curious, affectionate, playful, outgoing and become withdrawn, lonely, frightened, etc. These emotions are no different if the animal is kept as a companion animal or farmed for its meat. The majority of humans are distanced from the source of their meat as they never meet the animal, see how it is kept, reared, slaughtered and processed. They see only the meat in clean shiny packaging.

Turkeys, for example, are not generally considered appealing. However, they possess well-developed vocabularies, with twenty distinct vocalisations identified. They are able to recognise one another by their voices as well as their head characteristics. Turkeys also use their snoods (which hang down from their foreheads) to communicate emotions through colour changes. The colours range from white to red to blue. As mentioned earlier in this report, pigs are extremely intelligent. Examples of this include a pig’s ability to respond to verbal communication whereby piglets living with humans quickly learn their own names and follow simple voice commands. Pigs have also been shown to make comparisons and grasp the relationship between objects without even being given instructions.
What about environmental impact?

Consumerism is far greater at this time of year, along with the amount of excess waste being produced. What we choose to eat is one of the biggest factors in the personal impact we have on both environmental resources and world food supply.

**SUSTAINABILITY – PRODUCING ENOUGH FOOD**

In 2011 the government’s Foresight Report stated that the case for urgent action in the global food system is now compelling and that the food system must become sustainable. It’s essential that all sectors of the food system are honest about the problems we face and start working together to achieve sustainability. With the world population expected to rise to 9 billion by 2050 our requirement for food will increase. With dwindling resources and an already increasing number of undernourished people in the world, the effects could be devastating.

**A VEGETARIAN DIET**

A vegetarian diet not only benefits animals but also the environment as it is a much more sustainable way of producing food. Studies have shown that a vegetarian diet requires fewer resources, such as land, water and energy. Raising cattle is one of the most damaging components of agriculture. They cause the most environmental damage of any non-human species through over-grazing, soil erosion, desertification, tropical deforestation for ranches and growing soya for their feed, in addition to their gaseous emissions and manure products. A report by Greenpeace (2009) highlighted that the cattle sector is responsible for about 80% of all Amazon deforestation.

Meat is now the single largest source of animal protein in all affluent nations’ diets and demand for animal flesh is expected to more than double by the year 2050. Within this timescale the livestock population is expected to rise from 60 billion farm animals to 120 billion. In order to meet this growing appetite, animals will no doubt be reared more intensively and cheaply with factory farming and aquaculture (fish farming) causing further pollution, water and land usage. If nothing is done, the environmental impact of meat production can only increase. Diet is an important tool in working to achieve environmental sustainability. Studies on world food security estimate that an affluent diet containing meat requires up to 3 times as many resources as a vegetarian diet. Going vegetarian is an easy way to lower your own environmental impact and help ensure worldwide food security.

Please visit www.vegsoc.org/environment for further information on ‘Why it’s green to go vegetarian’.

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Why it’s green to go vegetarian

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What about our health?

The current food system is highly weighted in favour of intensive animal farming, meat and dairy industries – while promotion and marketing of the UK’s fruit and vegetable farmers is neglected. This comes at a time when the public is being told to eat at least five a day to help avoid the 70,000 premature deaths and reduce the £8 billion cost to the NHS caused by diet related ill health. According to the World Cancer Research Fund, there is “convincing evidence” that eating 50g of processed meat a day (such as two rashers of bacon) increases the likelihood of developing bowel cancer.

A study by Key et al in 2009 revealed that vegetarians were less likely to develop certain cancers than meat eaters. The research looked at the incidence of twenty types of cancer and followed over 61,000 individuals, (meat-eaters, fish-eaters and vegetarians), for a 12 year period. Professor Tim Key, lead author of the study and a Cancer Research UK epidemiologist at the University of Oxford, said: “Over a lifetime about one in three people will be diagnosed with cancer. So if 33 people in every hundred get cancer this would come down to about 29 with everyone following a vegetarian diet, which is 12 per cent lower. Our large study found the likelihood of people developing some cancers is lower among vegetarians than among people who eat meat. In particular vegetarians were much less likely to develop cancers of the blood.” Approximately one third of cancers are directly related to diet, and this study shows a very interesting link to blood cancers which had not been widely recognised in the past. While we would not claim a vegetarian diet to be a cure-all, it is a step in the right direction with vegetarians suffering fewer health problems such as heart disease, obesity and diabetes.

Going Veggie

Many vegetarians simply believe that it is wrong to kill animals when there is no need to. Others love and respect animals and want to minimise their suffering. Some vegetarians are specifically opposed to intensive farming and choose vegetarianism because it sends a strong signal, guarantees you won’t be eating an animal reared in appalling conditions, and avoids the distress experienced by all animals slaughtered for their meat.

Whatever your personal perspective, as a vegetarian you are helping to reduce the suffering of farmed animals.

For further information about all aspects of achieving a healthy, balanced vegetarian diet please visit www.vegsoc.org.

The true cost of Christmas is one of detriment to animals, the environment and health. A vegetarian Christmas is not only a compassionate one for animals, it also respects both you and the planet.
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