

‘Saving’ victims by being vegan – numbers from a hat

From [There's an Elephant in the Room](#) blog

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Image taken on a carp farm by Photojournalist Andrew Skowron

In a previous blog I included an observation about this idea of ‘saving’ victims by being vegan, but I’m revisiting it because it deserves to be addressed in a blog of its own. It should be noted that when this myth is repeated on social media, it is frequently connected with the framing of veganism as being synonymous with a plant-based diet, rather than its correct definition as a lived ethic rejecting all use of other individuals who value their lives.

“Veganism is a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment.”

In the absence of context, any number relating to victim numbers is meaningless. I found myself thinking here about the number 42 given in A Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy as ‘The Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, The Universe, and Everything. In that case there was humour in its meaninglessness, but when we are talking about the victims of our species there’s no humour in any of it at all. The numbers that I’ve seen attributed in social media to ‘how many animals are saved by being vegan’ illustrate a staggering lack of awareness about the extent of our species’ violence and disrespect for those whose planet we share. This serves to trivialise it, which in turn is a betrayal of those who are relying on us to tell the truth of their plight. So in this blog, my focus is to provide some context.

For a start, technically we don’t ‘save’ anyone by being vegan.

Let’s first consider those whose bodies, eggs and breastmilk we consume. Removing nonvegan demand, if enacted on a sufficiently large scale, could at best mean that our land-based and ‘farmed’ aquatic victims *will never exist*; their parents will never be sexually violated to birth or hatch them and the

number of animals bred by the industry for our use will diminish. To suggest otherwise is a rather significant insult to those who ‘farm’ lives and bodies for profit, implying that they would be insufficiently aware of shifting market demands to cut back on ‘production’ and diversify, and not for a moment would I suggest such a thing.

However, reducing demand is not ‘saving’ in the sense that *we* would consider if we were victims ourselves. Not one single desperate and frightened victim is ever given the chance to turn their back on the slaughterhouse and go home with their loved ones to a life of respect and companionship. And knowing the brutal existence that the victims of nonveganism endure as they go through the monstrous system from which their eggs, breastmilk and broken bodies will emerge, the most decent thing that can be done for them is to spare them the ordeal. I’m willing to be vegan for that.

On using numbers without context

Every single estimate that I have ever seen of the number of creatures that our monstrous tyranny creates in response to nonvegan demands, completely ignores the maths. Over the years, I’ve struggled to come up with accurate [statistics](#) of our victims but I have failed to gain anything better than incomplete but verifiable statistics in some areas, an estimate in others, and a horrified chill when I acknowledge the vast victim groups where I can’t even hazard a guess but I know it beggars belief.

Again there are a number of reasons for this. Statistics are sketchy to say the least, a consequence of a world where the majority of nonhumans are considered to have so little importance that we either don’t bother to count how many we’re slaughtering or we measure weight rather than numbers, arrogantly highlighting that we don’t even see our victims as individuals. Those statistics that do exist are mostly directly related to consumption but of course they’ve got nothing to do with concern for the victims but are an accounting tool related to the production of a vast and highly profitable industry. Current FAO statistics of land-based individuals slaughtered in slaughterhouses to be eaten, are over **80 billion** for the latest available year.

Records of the deaths of random non-industry or non-food related groups are produced independently for various reasons, mostly with insufficient data and always with no possibility of regular updating. Once we turn our attention to these, we are in serious trouble as far as accurate estimates are concerned.

Victim groups *not* associated with slaughterhouses, where statistics are unreliable/ incomplete/absent include:

- [Marine creatures](#) both wild and ‘farmed’ – estimated **2.7 trillion annually**;
- [Insects farmed](#) for consumption – estimated at least **1 trillion**;
- [Male chicks](#) killed by the egg industry estimated at **7.4 to 8 billion annually**;
- ‘Bycatch’ from human fishing practices – *no global estimate available*
- [Bees](#) in the honey industry – *no global estimate available*;
- Frogs, snails and other amphibians – *no global estimate available*;
- Dogs, cats and other species slaughtered in ‘small establishments’, ‘backyards’ or slaughterhouses not contributing to FAOSTAT – *no global estimate available*;
- [Wildlife dying from loss of habitat and climate change](#) caused by farming other species – *no global estimate available*;
- [Laboratory test subjects](#) – *no global estimate available*;
- Members of all land-based species who die before slaughter for a multitude of reasons including disease and injury – **up to 10% of the slaughter total**.

And *that* list is attributable mainly to the market for consumption. The following groups are also victims of nonvegan consumer demand.

- Individuals slaughtered for their **fur, fleece, skin and feathers** – *no global estimate available*;
- Trophy hunting – *no global estimate available*;
- ‘Culling’ of indigenous creatures so the ‘farmed’ animal profits may be maximised – *no global estimate available*;
- Deaths in the ‘entertainment’ industry – *no global estimate available*;
- Deaths of individuals incarcerated in various establishments such as zoos, safari and water parks etc – *no global estimate available*.
- Individuals caught in the wild to be traded as ‘pets’ – *no global estimate available*;
- Individuals whose bodies are used for ‘medicine’ or as ingredients in toiletries, cosmetics or other consumer goods – *no global estimate available*.
- Silk worms – *no global estimate available*;
- Unwanted dogs/cats and other species bred for use as accessories who become homeless and are executed for their crime – *no global estimate available*.

Taking numbers out of a hat

I’ve no doubt that at this point someone, somewhere, will be spotting groups who have been omitted from the list and I readily agree there will be many. A rough count of those where some sort of estimate is possible, gives a figure of about 3.8 trillion victims, and with a human population currently numbering over 7.8 billion, each human may be notionally responsible for more than 500 deaths a year. So **how** many more than 500? And that’s exactly my point.

Please look back at the lists above where most groups have *no possible global estimate*. I have no idea how many individuals that adds up to every year. Billions? Trillions? But one thing is certain. *Each victim was an individual. Each victim had a life and that life mattered to them, irrespective of the size of the body that life inhabited.*

So returning to the original topic of ‘how many animals are saved by being vegan’, I see the number 10 bandied about a lot. TEN?? Even the number 500 that I’ve detailed above, excludes so many statistically unrecognised groups as to render it meaningless. To use even *that* number to advocate for animal rights and veganism, would be the most sickening betrayal of those whose plight is more urgent than I can ever describe.

Let’s stick to the truth. Let’s use real statistics when we can get them and not undermine ourselves and trivialise our victims with made-up numbers taken out of a hat. Be vegan.