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**Letter to the Editor**

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### **Living in Abject Misery for Egg Production**

May 4 is International Respect for Chickens Day and the whole month is International Respect for Chickens Month, an annual project launched by the United Poultry Concerns since 2005.

It is a month to remember where our eggs come from and the suffering borne by the poultry birds to feed the masses.

The poultry industry represents chickens as mentally vacuous, eviscerated organisms. Hens bred for egg production are said to be suited to a cage, without any need for personal space or normal foraging and social activity. They are also believed to be characterized as aggressors who, notwithstanding their proclaimed passivity and affinity for cages, cannot live together without first debeaking a portion of their sensitive beaks, otherwise they will peck each other. Similarly the instinct to tend and fuss over her eggs and be a mother has been rooted out of these hens.

Egg-laying hens are hatched in giant, industrial incubators. What happens to the male chicks, who will never lay eggs and considered too scrawny a breed for meat production, are thus regarded by the industry as a worthless by-product. They are gassed at just a day old. For the females, it is a life of captivity and constant egg laying awaits.

Malaysia is still into conventional cages as the idea of changing to enriched cages may be met with strong opposition from the egg industry. Even then, with enriched cages, this can only provide seven per cent more space than traditional battery cages. This means that chickens are unable to stretch their wings and moving around can be difficult. The only enrichment is a scratching area – usually a small plastic mat – and a nest box, which is not required to have any nesting or bedding material in it.

The wild ancestors of chickens, red jungle fowl, lay around 10 to 20 eggs per year. But modern egg laying varieties are selectively bred to produce an average of 300 eggs per year. Laying an egg almost every day puts a huge strain on a hens body. Calcium leaches from the bones to help create eggshells, causing osteoporosis and an increased risk of bone breakages. This is exacerbated in caged hens due to their lack of exercise. Foot problems are also common in egg laying hens because the unsuitable flooring can cause foot deformities. In the case of free-range and barn hens, build-up excrement causes burns to their feet.

Regardless of how egg-laying hens are raised, when they are no longer able to produce the amount of eggs demanded of them by the poultry industry they are simply slaughtered and their meat used for making soup.

Animal welfare is important to farmers and they know that healthy hens lay more eggs.

Yet profits overrides all animal welfare concerns in the intensive animal production systems. Whether enriched

or conventional cages, a cage is still a cage. Layer hens will continue to live lives of abject misery inside barren battery cages for the next decade or more.

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) calls on the Agriculture Ministry, the egg industry, food companies and other stakeholders within the food industry to do the right thing in providing an acceptable level of welfare for layer hens.

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