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Letter to the Editor

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Poultry farming raises animal rights concerns

Malaysians consume chicken meat and eggs on a daily basis yet hardly a thought is given to the horrendous conditions in the modern livestock raising systems known as 'factory-farming'.

Consumption of poultry meat in Malaysia in 2016 was nearly 1.6 million metric tonnes whilst 12, 227 million chicken/duck eggs were estimated to be consumed in 2016 alone. (<http://www.dvs.gov.my>). Per capita consumption of chicken/duck eggs by Malaysians for 2016 is extremely a lot, an estimated 385 eggs.

The demand for eggs is very high but few consumers are aware of the way in which most eggs are produced by hens crammed in small wire cage, sometimes in tiers in dimly lit sheds, without access to sunlight or natural surroundings, and so denied the ability to exercise even the most basic natural instincts. The extreme confinement denies or seriously restricts the birds' freedom to express patterns of behaviour.

Deprivation of basic needs and behaviour such as walking, turning, exploring, interacting with or avoiding others, or being able to lie in peace and comfort endanger the physical and psychological health of animals. Bored hens will feather-peck and that is when de-beaking is done to stop them pecking at each other.

They are bred as egg producing machines, the aim being to obtain the optimum production from each bird regardless of its real welfare. This is achieved by forcing the hens into an unnatural number of egg cycles. They are forced to molt, or shed their feathers, because as soon as they grow a new layer of feathers, their reproduction cycles resume.

Even when forcing the hens to molt, they are put under tremendous amount of stress through food deprivation and water for a certain period of time. The stress manipulates the hens' egg cycles.

And what happens to hens that no longer can produce eggs after about two years in the battery cages? They are then sent to slaughter to be turned into chicken soup or cat and dog food due to the toughness and bruising of the meat. A tragic end for a hen who spends its life producing eggs to feed the masses.

The other purpose of a chicken is to produce excessive flesh for the meat industry called broiler chickens. But how many know about the short and miserable lives of broiler chickens? Most commonly they are crowded into thousands and confined along with their waste on small land area. Though not confined in cages, they also experience crowded confinement, poor air quality and stressful handling.

In addition to intense confinement, they are subjected to massive doses of hormones and antibiotics. They have the potential of exposure to various viruses and bacteria via the manure and urine in their environment.

When finally grown large enough, the birds are packed tightly into crates, stacked high on top of each other onto trucks, and transported over many miles through all weather extremes typically without food or water to the markets for slaughter.

Consumers are unaware about cruel practices being covered under the veil of secrecy that has protected animal abusing industries for a long time. These industries operate outside the public spotlight because the way they treat animals would not be condoned by those concerned about animal welfare.

Malaysia has the opportunity to lead the world when it comes to treatment of animals. Yet we are behind other developed nations and this shows how clearly change is needed.

It is about time the Ministry of Agriculture look into a Farm Animal Act prohibiting the rearing of birds in cages, crates or other forms of intensive confinement that violates the Animal Welfare Act 2015.

Change is needed, not only for animals but for farmers who need to be able to plan for the future with certainty and confidence.

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