

Don't like chicken? There must be something wrong!

Katrina Sharman, 17 June 2009

The marketing gurus at Ingham chicken have caused a bit of a stir lately by airing a series of ads that suggest 'if you don't like chicken, there is something very wrong with you.'

While I'm all for a bit of puffery, I'm not sure I entirely agree with the suggestion by the Advertising Standards Board that 'most vegetarians would find this advertisement amusing as it pokes fun at itself and chicken eaters generally' (Complaint reference number 214/08).

To the contrary, it seems somewhat tasteless to make light of an industry that can take an emotionally and physiologically complex animal 'from nest to nugget' in 35 days. More so, when the vast majority of 'normal people' have little awareness of how the 450 million chickens consumed each year are produced.

The Australian market for chicken meat has increased by 15,000% over the last 50 years; so fast in fact that the only way to meet our national appetite has been to move the industry indoors where birds can be raised in sheds with tens of thousands of others and grown at unnaturally fast rates, which can cause painful leg conditions and skeletal disorders.

Chickens raised in factory farms live their short lives in worlds of artificial light designed to maximise their growth and efficiency. Natural behaviours such as nest-building and nurturing their young are completely denied. The treatment of chickens is of course symptomatic of our nation's move towards intensive or factory farming generally and the vertical integration of animal industries at rates which have largely left the traditional Aussie farmer for dust.

The law has been a willing participant in facilitating the deprivation and suffering of chickens, and indeed many other animals, since the enactment of our ironically named anti-cruelty or animal welfare statutes.

While one could be forgiven for assuming that such legislation was intended to provide meaningful protections, Professor David Weisbrot AM, president of the Australian Law Reform Commission, who has identified animal protection as potentially the next great social justice movement, recently suggested that the legislation is, at least upon first impression, very misleading and "the loopholes are so large that you could potentially drive a factory farmer's truck through them".

Professor Weisbrot was alluding to the fact that the exemptions and defences in State and Territory Laws, combined with Federally-agreed Codes of Practice that underpin many animal industries, essentially sanction the systemic abuse of staggering numbers of animals.

In fact once animals are classified as 'livestock', it seems the floodgates are opened to a range of violations, from permanent confinement to the carrying out of painful mutilations without anaesthetic. Such acts would in all likelihood, constitute criminal offences were they carried out against your pet cat or dog.

The law provides little relief for those consumers who have become aware of the plight of farm animals. Calls for mandatory labelling of animal-derived food products, which would challenge animal industry spin and enable shoppers to take a stand against factory farmed products, have to date fallen on deaf ears; they appear to be hiding in the same in-tray as calls to follow Europe's lead by phasing out the worst aspects of factory farming.

While the Government may be slow to act, the legal profession has increasingly expressed a willingness to take a stand against injustices perpetrated against animals. For example, many of Australia's leading law schools are now teaching animal law, law firms are opening their doors to animal protection matters and increasing numbers of practitioners are calling for law reform.

I think I've stumbled on the cure for those people who 'don't like chicken' or at least those people who don't like the shameful way that the vast majority of animals in this country are treated. Anyone for a good dose of animal law?

Surely the time has come for us to take a stand against the institutionalised suffering of animals in recognition that they are not mere assembly-line commodities, but rather sentient beings with lives that matter.

Katrina Sharman is the Corporate Counsel for Voiceless, the animal protection institute. For further details and to access

Voiceless's latest report 'From Nest to Nugget', visit www.voiceless.org.au

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