

Ethical agriculture requires animal activism

It seems likely that the main purpose for having this enquiry is because the animal agriculture industry feels threatened by the actions of animal activists, and is worried that their businesses may suffer financially as a result. I understand these concerns, and feel empathy for anyone who feels like their job or business is being harmed. Ultimately, however, I must argue that animal activists have to be free to expose any cruel and/or unlawful activities that take place in the industry with regards to the treatment of animals, and any further restrictions attempt to silence such activism are unjust. It is ultimately bad for the industry, as well as bad for the animals, if cruel or illegal practices are allowed to go unnoticed. The observation that every few months new footage is released uncovering various instances of legal animal abuse that the public largely object to (e.g. live exports), is strong evidence that the existing laws and regulations are insufficient to prevent on-going animal cruelty. Animal activists therefore play a necessary role in reducing animal suffering by exposing both legal and illegal practices that are undoubtedly cruel, and would be considered serious animal abuse (and would likely be illegal) if the subject was a dog or cat (rather than chicken or pig, for example). Australian consumers have a right to know what happens to their food before it hits their plates.

The majority of other submissions I have read appear primarily concerned about theft, trespassing, physical safety of staff etc. These submissions seem to ignore the fact that all of these activities are already illegal, and covered under standard criminal law. There is no need to further legislate on activities that are already illegal *and* sufficiently enforced. It seems very plausible that the motivation behind these arguments is instead a defensive response to the whistleblowing that is usually a consequence of such activism. As far as I am aware, there have been no actual incidents of an animal activist assaulting a farmer (in fact, a quick Google search found evidence of the contrary – a farmer firing shots to scare off activists [link-1]). If there was an assault on a farmer, as terrible as that would be, that would still not justify changing pre-existing laws that already deem such actions illegal. It would simply require pressing charges on whichever individuals committed a given crime.

The other concern is therefore that animal activism is harming the agriculture business economically. This concern is rational at the individual business-owner level, but ultimately it is unjustified when considering the entire industry. It is also not actually a valid moral argument against activism (e.g. anti-smoking campaigns harm the tobacco industry, but of course this is not a valid argument against them). Nevertheless I will address it, arguing that it is not even empirically true that activism harms the agriculture industry as a whole. It is of course possible that as a result of activist's whistleblowing efforts, such as releasing footage of some cruel industry practice (legal or illegal – e.g. grinding up male chicks in the egg industry [link-2]), that people may reduce their consumption of that product. This may economically harm some businesses whose main product is produced via the practice that consumers consider cruel (e.g. caged eggs, or eggs where the male chick was ground up [2]). Consumers who avoid such animal products would have to switch to other, non-animal based products, such as soy or lentils, which ultimately come from (you guessed it!), agriculture!

As you can see, animal activism may influence consumer choices but it cannot actually remove value from the agriculture industry, it can only shift spending from some areas to others based on what consumers consider ethical. This is free market capitalism. An animal agriculture business may be implementing a cruel but legal practice (e.g. debeaking [3]), and a whistleblower may expose footage of it to previously unaware consumers. The consumer chooses to switch to alternative food products, and the market forces begin to favour the new, more ethical product (e.g. plant based

products, or eggs from a farm that doesn't use debeaking). This is not a sufficient system to ensure all animal agriculture practices are ethical, cost-minimisation incentives will always tend to favour poorer conditions for the animals, and strong animal welfare laws are vital. Ultimately, the existence of animal activism provides a free market mechanism to improve the ethical viability of the animal agriculture industry through shifting consumer choice. The agriculture industry is therefore not harmed by animal activism, on the contrary, it requires it.

links:

[1] <https://www.perthnow.com.au/news/wa/harvey-farmer-fires-shotgun-in-confrontation-with-vegan-activists-ng-b881106426z>

[2] <https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/chickens/7645698>

[3] <https://kb.rspca.org.au/knowledge-base/why-does-the-rspca-approved-farming-scheme-allow-for-beak-trimming-of-hens/>

“If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit non-humans for the same purpose?” Peter Singer
- Animal Liberation (1975).