

## **August 2009 Chick culling**

So the great barn door of a South African chicken hatchery has been prised open – albeit just a chink. Courtesy of Jan Serfontein’s staff at Boskop Layer Chickens, ARA, the NSPCA and Carte Blanche, daily activities in this poultry Auschwitz near Potchefstroom were brought to the attention of local consumers. And, not before time, the viewing public has had a glimpse of life (and death) on a modern factory farm.

Apparently, the nation is deeply shocked. The programme generated hundreds of outraged emails, offers to adopt chicks and threats to boycott Boskop ‘products’. It seems there’s nothing like seeing the fluffy yellow chicks of our nursery books dying of starvation, thirst and exposure in a concrete pit, to wake folk up to the realities of how an egg lands up on their breakfast plates.

All well and good. But open the barn door a little further and many more of the system’s abominations come crawling into the light – and with them, many more of its moral contradictions. These have to do with what are deemed to be “acceptable methods of humane slaughter” by chicken and egg producers and (by virtue of their complicity), retailers, consumers and even animal welfare groups. To my mind, these processes are also in need of urgent attention and media exposure.

For starters, I have yet to be shown what is ‘humane’ about the slaughter of a healthy animal – human or non-human. The term is inherently contradictory. But let’s not waste time on that debate – nor what happens to the hens in battery and broiler farms, since I could write a whole book about those equally vile places. Let’s rather focus on standard practices in the egg industry and the methods used to slaughter something like 23 million male chicks annually in South Africa. As male chickens cannot lay eggs, and have not been genetically modified and selectively bred for meat, they are of no economic value to producers and are therefore removed from the system, optimally at one day old.

It's the methods of their 'removal' that beggar belief. The Humane Slaughter Association of the United Kingdom holds the view that: "although aesthetically unpleasant, instantaneous mechanical destruction (IMD) is a humane and effective disposal method for day-old chicks when used, managed and maintained correctly." Our regulatory body, SA Poultry Producers, clearly agrees, because the method is much used here. *Live* chicks are tossed by the thousand into rapidly rotating rollers which are armed either with knives or projections that crush and shred the birds into tiny bits, ready for the fertilizer or potting soil or whatever they're destined to become next. Aesthetically unpleasant? What a description. It's akin to describing an open sewer as nasally – er - challenging!

And one can't help but ask: 'what dark intelligence invents these machines in the first place?' And how are they tested before sale? I have images of a laboratory filled with impervious technicians, noting on their white boards how many chicks 'arrive alive' after running the gauntlet through the macerators. And, surely, even with the most perfected of mechanisms, in the most perfectly monitored hatcheries, many chickens escape a quick death because it is impossible to 'process' so many 'units' per hour without inefficiencies and exceptions.

Many hatcheries prefer to gas the male chicks with carbon dioxide, claiming that it's not only cheap and efficient but – you guessed it – 'humane'. But as Dr Mohan Raj of the School of Clinical Veterinary Science at the University of Bristol in England will be quick to tell you, it's anything *but* kind. CO<sub>2</sub> induces breathlessness and panic in the birds as they try to expel the gas from their lungs by exhaling as fast as they can. They die from slow, painful suffocation rather like a patient with emphysema. Humane? You bet *ya not*.

Those hatcheries that don't use these methods of dispatch either electrocute the birds, manually dislocate the spinal column from the chicks' skulls (a process called "cervical dislocation"), or throw the chicks into trash cans where they are buried alive under each other – something I have witnessed personally. You see, the Boskop factory farm is not alone in choosing cheap and expedient means of getting rid of their male chicks, and unregulated activities in the industry are numerous and well documented. Some KzN operations simply drown their chicks, or drop them at the 'Maritzburg and Camperdown rubbish dumps or in wheelie bins, their distress calls audible from a considerable distance. And I would wager

a (vegan) whisky that these farmers, like Jan Serfontein, are accredited members of the Southern African Poultry Association.

Now bear in mind that animal behaviourists have proven that chickens are more advanced than young children, that they form strong family ties, have good problem-solving abilities, can recognize more than a hundred other chickens and remember them, and have more than thirty types of vocalization. They are sensitive, inquisitive, socialized beings - not units in a callous production line, or items on a shopping list.

Something is rotten in the State of Denmark and it's up to those who professed such moral outrage at what is going on at Boskop to show South African consumers what is deemed 'normal' and 'acceptable' on an industrial chicken farm. I challenge Carte Blanche and all those involved in 'outing' Jan Serfontein and his Boskop operation to publicize what goes on elsewhere in the industry, particularly as assurances from retailers that they won't stock his eggs or chickens might become a convenient salve to consumers' consciences who now think that goings-on elsewhere are 'humane'.

And I also challenge South Africans with a conscience to **stop eating eggs** from these hell-holes!

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