

Humane Education Lesson Plans

The Story Behind Factory Farming (Grades 6-8)

Lesson Introduction

- 1) Animal welfare
- 2) Human health
- 3) Environmental health

More and more consumers are becoming aware and increasingly concerned with how farm animals are treated. Industrial type farm settings, commonly referred to as factory farms, have replaced traditional, more natural farm settings in order to produce the highest output at the lowest cost. While there is a need to find economic and efficient means of raising livestock, animal welfare organizations oppose practices which cause needless pain, suffering and stress to the animals involved.

Animal welfare

Factory farms use crates and cages that either totally isolate individual animals from others or crowd many animals together in order to save space. Factory farms are also characterized by the manipulation of diet in ways that interfere with the animal's good health. One example of this is adding Vitamin D to an animal's diet so that it can live without sunlight exposure. Often, animals are handled in stressful or injurious ways. Many surgeries are performed without the use of anesthesia, such as clipping the beaks of hens so that they don't peck each other when confined in cramped cages. Selective breeding practices, which produce characteristics desired by farmers, often increase animal suffering. This happens when animals, including broiler hens and pigs, are bred to gain weight at such a fast rate that most cannot walk or stand.

Human health

While there are undoubtedly nutrients in animal-derived foods that are beneficial to the human diet, the majority of Americans consume more meat, eggs, and dairy than is necessary to sustain health. In fact, the typical American diet is so high in fat, cholesterol, and sodium that we have some of the highest incidences of heart disease, osteoporosis, diabetes, and cancer in the world. Simply decreasing the amount of animal product in our diets would increase health and lessen the need for factory farming as an industry.

Another concern regarding factory farming in terms of human health is the overuse of antibiotics and artificial growth hormones. To keep animals from getting sick when living in overcrowded and unhealthy conditions, farmers sometimes pre-treat them all with antibiotics. With repeated exposure to an antibiotic, its effectiveness is decreased. Artificial growth hormones are sometimes used as well, to increase the rate at which an animal gains weight and body mass. These antibiotics and growth hormones are absorbed by our bodies when we consume meat, eggs, or dairy from animals treated with them.

Overcrowded conditions have helped pave the way for several new diseases, including “Mad Cow Disease”, “Avian Flu” and “Swine Flu.” In fact, the unsanitary environment of factory farms has led the general public to be told to expect raw meat and eggs, and unpasteurized dairy, to be contaminated with bacteria, viruses, or parasites.

Environmental health

Because there is such a high demand for animal agriculture, many valuable natural resources have been depleted across the globe. Generally speaking, raising animals for consumption isn't very efficient. The amount of grain that needs to be fed to one cow during its life would feed many, many more people than that one cow would feed. Because the industry is inefficient by nature, the vast majority of grain harvested in the U.S. is fed to farm animals. To create more farmland to grow grain for these animals, many forests, wetlands, and other natural ecosystems and wildlife habitats around the world have been turned into crop and grazing land.

In addition, the waste produced by livestock is extremely high- more than 130 times greater than that produced by humans. This waste has contaminated groundwater, streams and rivers, as well as the ozone layer. The World Health Organization estimates that all forms of transportation combined, world-wide, have a lesser negative impact on the environment than does raising livestock.