Animal welfare, vegetarianism and intensive farming
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The new books on intensive farming, meat-consumption and vegetarianism released by American author Jonathan Foer and German writer Karen Duve (*) caused a heated debate in Switzerland. Both of these authors have targeted the lack of protection for animals and the excessive consumption of meat in the USA and the EU in particular. However it would be a mistake to apply their statements too closely to the situation in Switzerland.

As recently as a quarter of a century ago, it was still common practice to use battery cages for chickens, crate stalls for sows, permanent tethering, castration without anaesthetic, tail docking, beak trimming and tooth extraction in piglets in Switzerland as well. Fortunately, these horrors have been eliminated, but they continue to be legal in the EU and the USA. The slaughter of animals without anaesthetic is prohibited in Switzerland (in contrast with the EU and the USA) as are intensive farms involving tens or hundreds of thousands of cattle, pigs or chickens.

Progress in animal protection

In contrast with livestock management methods common in the EU and beyond Europe, Switzerland has been able to make significant progress in improving the lot of its animals, thanks to improvements in animal welfare ordinances, state support for particularly animal-friendly forms of husbandry and consumer awareness. Detailed information about the above differences is available in the latest brochure from Swiss Animal Protection SAP – “Free trade and animal welfare: a comparison between Switzerland and the EU” – available by order or directly at www.animal-protection.net.

Livestock management: Ethically questionable?

Nevertheless: it is right that the debate initiated by Foer and Duve take place in Switzerland too. We also need to question whether vegetarianism would actually be the answer for animal protection, and whether keeping livestock is, of itself, ethically questionable. The climate debate also raises questions about the Swiss farming system in general, regardless of whether its animals are reared in conditions that are appropriate, or kept in circumstances that fail to protect their welfare. In our country too, there are many animal welfare problems that still await a solution; high-performance breeding and an increasing cost pressure on farmers are now adding to these difficulties. Our public has many questions to discuss, therefore, and they will still be relevant long after Duve und Foer’s books have stopped being of any interest in the media.
Switzerland imports a large (excessive) volume of meat

In Switzerland, the consumption of meat has fallen from its high point of 72 kg/head in the mid-1980s to its current value of 51 kg/head (Proviande, 2009); it therefore lies at about the same level as China (53 kg), though the trend in that country is travelling in the opposite direction (just like most other nations, it is experiencing an increase in meat consumption). For comparison purposes: the average figure is 82 kg in industrial nations; in Germany it is 88 kg and 123 kg in the USA. However, Swiss meat consumption still seems high in comparison with the world average (42 kg) or with consumption in the developing countries (31 kg). This has less to do with an excess of livestock in this country (**) and more to do with the fact that far too many animal products are imported – mainly for the catering industry and for cheap offers from retailers and discounters. They alone account for 110,000 t of meat, equivalent to 15 kg/head! This imported meat originates from animal factories, by way of harrowing transportation methods and husbandry conditions that are prohibited in Switzerland itself.

Vegetarianism is one solution

In the face of these facts, does the vegetarianism propagated by Foer and Duve represent the solution to the problem of animal protection? There is no doubt that vegetarianism is an individual, ethical decision (and veganism even more so) that always bears animal suffering and its reduction in mind – and that this view deserves the highest respect. However, we must also ask whether vegetarianism/veganism is the only possible ethical way of minimising animal suffering, or whether other animal protection strategies would be helpful, or even necessary as a supplement.

One indication for the latter view is provided by the fact that animal protection and vegetarianism arise from different roots, and that they are traditionally mostly organised in separate structures with aims and purposes that do not always coincide. We might say that practising vegetarians and vegans minimise the overall amount of suffering associated with the use of animals, in that fewer animals are used, or kept in inappropriate conditions and brutally transported and slaughtered. A person who continues to be a vegetarian for 80 years will prevent the death and probable suffering of about 1,000 fattened chickens, cows, calves and pigs by his/her systematic behaviour, assuming the current average level of consumption in Switzerland.
Eating less meat

From a purely qualitative point of view, the same effect can be achieved by people deciding to eat less meat. If 3 million Swiss people gave up two meals containing meat every week, that would have the same result (in terms of the reduction in the number of livestock animals kept and slaughtered) as if 900,000 Swiss citizens were to become vegetarians. Both strategies, vegetarianism and a reduction in meat consumption, are therefore effective from a purely practical animal protection policy point of view, though experience has shown that it is easier to persuade people to reduce meat consumption than to avoid it altogether, and that this approach is more likely to lead to success. The considerable reduction in meat consumption achieved in Switzerland over the past 25 years has probably been because people are eating less meat rather than doing without meat altogether. This does not necessarily mean that the situation will stay the same in the future, since the vegetarian component of the equation seems to include more young people on average, while the “Wartime/Grandparent” generation, whose meat consumption grew as the economy developed and who were predominantly positively indicated, will contribute less and less to overall consumption as time goes on.

However, even if the vegetarian associations and animal protection organisations are successful in increasing the proportion of vegetarians, abattoirs will still not be abolished in Switzerland. This is partly because of the vegetarians themselves – they may not eat meat, but they do consume eggs and milk products. At an average consumption of about 180 eggs per head per year, vegetarians will have made use of 50 laying hens over 80 years – and since nature produces only male and female chickens, they will also be responsible for the death of 50 male day-old chicks (**). Since a cow can also only produce milk if it has a calf once a year, and since only one in every two of those calves will turn out to be a female that can be reared to become a milk cow itself, the vegetarian way of life must also lead to calves being fattened and slaughtered. These ethical/animal-protection implications therefore suggest that the animal protection strategies based on “Vegetarianism” and “Reduction in meat consumption” should be set side by side with each other.

Animal protection is more than just vegetarianism

However, neither vegetarianism nor veganism provide a satisfactory solution to the urgent question affecting the fate of the millions of livestock animals that are being born, reared and finally slaughtered now, and most probably for the next five or ten years. Animal rights advocates care (and must care) for real, existing animals. They focus on an absolutely pragmatic approach, with the aim of helping living animals, now and in the future. Animal protection campaigners must think about potential concepts, such as an end to the keeping of livestock – including the (mis)use of animals for research, game keeping and (sadly) pets, as well as cattle, pigs, chickens, etc. They must also take a position against the over-consumption of animal products; it would be a sin to refuse to help and protect animals again, or to allow them to be mistreated by battery cages, crate stalls, brutal transportation methods, castration or killing (slaughter) without anaesthetics! In the end, the fact that any animal already born will be killed at the end of its life may – as long as its death is fast and humane, and carried out under anaesthetic – be less appalling than a life full of pain and suffering that is really no life at all. This is precisely the fate faced by livestock world-wide, and doled out systematically to those kept under intensive farming conditions.

Luckily, there are (and always were) people who do not simply close their eyes to such conditions; they do not just rant about them – they try to improve the animals’ lot. After all, those animals cannot help the fact that they live under the “care” of humans, or that they are forced to suffer. Any animal that has been born into this world deserves our support. At the very least, we should fight for better rearing conditions and care, kinder methods of transportation and safer, faster anaesthesia/death.
The important role of consumers

Consumers’ purchasing behaviour is of particular importance in this respect. In Switzerland, sensitised consumers and retailers with an interest in animal protection have made it possible for 80% of cows and 75% of chickens to have practically daily access to fields, and for ⅔ of all pigs to have an outdoor run. This exceeds the standards set out in the animal protection regulations. Farm animals can still mostly be kept in rural conditions in this country, unlike the intensive farming methods practised abroad. Swiss consumers’ demand for products based on animals reared out of doors and on a free-range basis has played a valuable part in the practical protection of animals. This has enabled the quality of life of individual animals to be raised, and given back hundreds of thousands of animals at least some of their dignity.

Intensive farming is “rationalising” small farmers away around the world

The increase in meat consumption all around the world (though not in Switzerland) is being mainly satisfied by means of industrial animal production, using intensive animal husbandry methods and taking no account of animal welfare. Meat exports are being pushed by the EU (the regions where intensive animal production is practised are, for example, North-West Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Brittany and the Po Valley) and the USA. By now, however, Brazil and other nations are also promoting their own exports of meat, especially pork and (increasingly) chicken, since eating these animals is not affected by religious prejudices around the world.

This animal-fattening business is mainly dominated by large agricultural conglomerates. Animal protection, ecology and climate problems play no part in their considerations. The only goal is to produce as much cheap meat as possible. Small and medium-sized farmers using rural forms of livestock management where animals are kept out of doors have been rationalised out of existence in the EU, the USA and Brazil. Cheap exports from these countries also pose a threat to the continuing rural form of livestock management practised in Switzerland, and force hundreds of thousands of small farmers in developing and emerging nations all round the world out of work and wages. In this way, these countries become ever more dependent on agricultural conglomerates and the agricultural commodity markets for their supply of food, all the more so because their requirement for food is growing while the available area of agriculturally-useable land is becoming smaller as a result of poor management based solely on artificial fertilisers.
Intensive farming – climate killer

There is no doubt that industrial livestock production based on intensive farming methods is relevant to the climate. It is equally well-known that large volumes of CO$_2$ and laughing gas (which affect the climate) escape into the atmosphere when grazing pasture is converted into fields where crops are grown (whether to feed human beings or to produce feed for animals) by methods that are based on synthetic (nitrogen) fertilisers rather than those closely connected with nature. The increasing use of arable fields in unsuitable locations for the industrial production of animal feed to supply factory farms is therefore highly relevant to the climate.

Rural livestock management methods protect the climate

It is easy to recognise the difference between industrial livestock production and rural animal husbandry. The latter is mainly based on animals that eat roughage, such as dairy and beef cattle, sheep, goats and horses; it generally manages without large quantities of concentrated feed. Not only are these close-to-nature, pasture-based forms of managing livestock on grassland (which covers 70% of the land usable for agriculture world-wide) not climate-relevant, they also result in extra CO$_2$ being stored in the soil's humus layer. Ruminants on meadows do not compete with human beings for food because they feed on meadows/long-term grasslands that cannot usually be used to grow crops, producing milk and meat from the grass and herbage that we humans cannot digest. This balanced interaction between the land, meadow plants and livestock has developed over thousands of years and is one of Man’s greatest cultural achievements. It holds the key to careful interaction with our climate. Rural animal husbandry and forms of farm management that stay close to nature (organic and integrated production farms) can therefore form part of the solution to the climate problem (****).

(**) In most Cantons, a balanced, ecologically-sensible relationship operates between the productive land and the livestock. However, in a few regions (and particularly in the Canton of Lucerne), the density of livestock has increased considerably during the past few years. This is apparently the result of a lack of political will to limit or reduce the number of animals. Ammonia emissions are regarded as a particular problem in these regions of livestock congestion. As a consequence, farmers are finding it ever harder to construct animal-friendly housing with generous dimensions and an outdoor run. Companies building livestock housing are already advertising the ecological advantages of space-saving stall systems where the animals can be locked up for their whole lives. A completely mad increase in the burden carried by animals!

(***) Hybrid chicken farms, which rear laying and fattening birds alike, have now gained acceptance world-wide. Hybrid fattening chickens are grown for the sole purpose of a fast growth of meat (breast and leg), and males and females are fattened up together. Hybrid laying hens are bred solely for their laying performance (300 eggs/year). Male laying chickens are not cost-effective for fattening, and are killed after hatching, when they are day-old chicks. Research is also currently being carried out into ways of discovering the gender of the embryo at an early stage in the fertilised egg so that “male eggs” can be separated out, rather than for day-old chicks to have to be killed.

(****) Anita Idel: Die Kuh – Kein Klima Killer! (“The cow is not a climate killer”) 2010