

A conversation with Linnea Laestadius, August 22, 2013

Participants

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Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Dr. Laestadius.

Summary

Linnea Laestadius is an assistant professor of public health at the University of Wisconsin. GiveWell spoke to Dr. Laestadius as a part of its investigation of the cause of farm animal welfare. The conversation covered the farm animal welfare movements in the U.S. versus Europe (focusing on Sweden, where Dr. Laestadius has done research), as well as major impediments to changing the U.S. agriculture industry, and the specific case of the failed Egg Products Inspection Act.

Farm animal welfare advocacy in Europe versus the United States

European countries have made more progress in improving conditions for farm animals than the United States has. This is demonstrated by the types of legislation in place in Europe but not the U.S., such as laws that ban gestation crates for pigs and set minimum cage sizes for hens.

In Sweden, for example, comprehensive animal welfare legislation was passed over a decade ago. This law set standards for farms to ensure that farm animals would be able to engage in their natural behaviors. Undercover investigations in recent years have exposed some farms to be out of compliance with these welfare standards.

One of the factors that enabled this comprehensive legislation was the high level of public awareness about animal welfare issues. People in Sweden are more focused on social welfare reform than people in the U.S., and this extends to animals. Astrid Lindgren, author of the Pippi Longstocking books, was a prominent animal welfare activist who influenced public opinion in Sweden. The image of green pastures dotted with cattle is a part of Sweden's cultural heritage; this may be an influence in the public's support of free-range animal agriculture.

The opposition to this legislation was also not as strong as it would have been from the animal industry in the U.S. Though there are some large animal agriculture facilities in Sweden, the industry is not as concentrated.

Denmark banned the use of non-therapeutic antibiotics in animals. This legislation may have led to better conditions for farm animals because producers need to take measures to prevent the spread of disease between animals, such as providing them with more space.

Because of the higher welfare standards, meat in Europe is more expensive than in the U.S. One way to decrease meat consumption in the U.S. may be to raise welfare standards. Since Sweden's entry into the European Union, meat prices have dropped in the country and consumption has risen, because Sweden can now import meat from countries with lower welfare standards.

The scale of the problem is much larger in the U.S. than in Europe, as the number of animals raised for food in the U.S. is much higher. The potential for improving farm animal welfare in the U.S. is gradually increasing. Meat consumption has begun to slowly taper off, and "ag gag" laws have met with resistance from the public. Most of the proposed "ag gag" laws have failed. However, when someone was prosecuted under the recent Utah law, there was so much negative attention that the charges were dropped. These are indicators that people in the U.S. are starting to consider animal welfare more than before.

Reforming the agricultural system in the U.S.

There is value in funding both outreach and political advocacy efforts. A major question for donors is whether they want to improve the standards for animals or reduce the number of animals that are eaten.

Impediments to reform

- *Political opposition.* Large agricultural producers hold a lot of power, especially in agricultural states. These states often have a strong influence in Congress, disproportionate to their share of the population. Earlier this year, a cafeteria in one of the Congressional office buildings tried to implement Meatless Mondays. After just one Meatless Monday, the meat industry lobby protested the event and it was swiftly retracted.
- *Resistance to individual dietary change.* Meat consumption in the U.S., while it has been slightly decreasing in recent years, is still significantly higher than in most other countries. This relies on meat being quite inexpensive. It is difficult to persuade people to consume less meat or to buy more expensive meat from animals that were raised with higher welfare standards.
- *Internal disagreement.* Within the animal advocacy movement, there is disagreement about how to best help animals. Advocates tend to fall in one of two camps: welfarists and abolitionists. Welfarists support legislation to gradually improve standards for the treatment of farm animals, while abolitionists often oppose such legislation because they fear that improving standards on farms lends legitimacy to animal agriculture and relieves the guilt that people feel about eating animals, thereby slowing progress towards abolishing the consumption of meat and animal products. The welfare camp, which includes most of the larger animal

advocacy organizations, does a lot of work on legislative change. The abolitionist camp, championed by Gary Francione, professor of law at Rutgers University, focuses on education.

Successful reform

Many state ballot measures to improve farm animal welfare have been passed in recent years. Almost all of these measures have been initiated by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS).

Failed reform

The Egg Products Inspection Act

The Egg Products Inspection Act, which would improve conditions for egg laying hens, has been introduced in Congress multiple times. It has the support of HSUS, a leading animal welfare advocacy organization, as well as the United Egg Producers, the group that represents the egg industry. The passage of state ballot measures put pressure on the United Egg Producers to be involved in establishing a baseline standard for the welfare of laying hens at the federal level, rather than risk states passing reforms that could hurt business for egg producers.

Abolitionist animal welfare advocates oppose the act because it codifies a standard for the treatment of egg laying hens, which they believe could make it harder to improve standards further at the state level. However, the major opposition to the act comes from the producers of other animals, who are concerned that it may lead to similar welfare improvements being legislated for other parts of the animal industry. These industry groups have successfully defeated the legislation multiple times.

Who else is working on this?

- Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) – leads many legislative efforts
- Compassion Over Killing – has more of a regional than national presence, currently conducting a campaign to get Subway to have more vegan offerings
- Vegan Outreach – doesn't do policy work, mainly distributes leaflets on college campuses
- Farm Animal Rights Movement (FARM) – advocates primarily for reducing meat consumption and promoting veganism, has worked to conduct follow-up with individuals to track dietary change, uses “pay-per-view” campaigns where individuals are paid to watch videos on animal cruelty.
- Farm Sanctuary – rescues farm animals, opens sanctuary to the public to allow them to meet the animals (there are also smaller sanctuaries for farm animals such as Poplar Spring Animal Sanctuary in Maryland), also advocates for legislative welfare reforms
- Carnism Awareness and Action Network (CAAN) – works to reduce meat consumption by raising awareness around “carnism,” a term coined by psychologist

and animal activist Melanie Joy, to refer to the ideology that conditions people to eat certain animals

- Mercy for Animals – conducts undercover investigations to monitor compliance with regulations
- Humane Research Council – consults with animal welfare advocates

Suggestions for further conversations and research

- Ryan Huling manages all of the college campaigns for peta2, the youth division of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). PETA is an outlier among animal welfare groups because their tactics are controversial. Targeting young people is a good strategy for causing behavior change.
- Nick Cooney authored *Change of Heart*, a book about using less ideologically-based strategies and more evidence-based strategies for animal welfare advocacy. Nick can speak to the metrics for effectiveness in animal welfare advocacy.
- Melanie Joy coined the term "Carnism" and founded CAAN. She also wrote a book called *Strategic Action for Animals*.
- James McWilliams is a prominent author and blogger on farm animal issues.
- Histories of the animal welfare movement in the U.S. may be helpful, including *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, by Diane Beers.

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