

### **Customers control what supermarkets sell**

Many people still do not accept that animals are conscious beings and consequently they feel nothing about treating them as if they have neither emotions nor physical reactions to pain.

Cruelty to animals will continue to be underplayed as long as we do not speak out against it. It is true that animal species are nearly all part of the food chain - and we ourselves are part of that - but deliberate cruelty, or even careless lack of compassion, is an issue that urgently requires more prominence.

In his stunning book, *Homo Deus*, historian Yuval Noah Harari says that cattle and chickens probably lead the most miserable lives of all creatures on earth. We can add a few others, including sows that spend most of their lives standing in narrow crate-like pens in which they are unable to turn around and that live only as long as they are giving birth to litter after litter before being slaughtered. *Know what precedes the food on your plate.*

It would be unrealistic to expect human beings to cease eating meat, and we are not trying to do that, as most humans are meat-eaters, but the cold profit-directed cruelty of much factory farming is appalling in its disregard for animal sentience and a life of misery.

Why don't we, the consumers, care? Because out of sight is out of mind. Many who can well afford free range meat and free range eggs don't give factory farming and the suffering it causes a passing thought. It is left to animal rights organisations to beg for greater control over inhumane commercial farming methods, and with conspicuous lack of success because most consumers don't care.

Battery eggs are the products of sheer suffering. Meat-eaters, meaning most of us, need to insist that animals raised for slaughter live their lives under decent conditions and are killed as quickly and humanely as possible.

But can we always thoroughly trust the 'free range' label? I am looking at an official NSPCA statement that says: "You have to rely on the statements made by the store as none of these products is endorsed by an independent body such as an animal welfare organisation."

Compassion in World Farming has been campaigning for years for battery farming to be phased out, but the constant argument is a monetary one: that free range is more expensive and accounts for as little as 5% of egg sales per annum. Compassion in World Farming has for years pointed out that as long as free range eggs occupy only a small niche in the marketplace, they will remain expensive, but that were free range eggs to become mainstream, which is happening in Europe, even in impoverished countries, prices would adjust downwards. Even so-called barnyard is greatly preferable to the dreadful battery bird method.

Closing our eyes and our minds to unnecessary suffering of farm animals for the sake of profits makes us complicit. Please buy free range eggs and demand that supermarkets keep free range chicken. We are beginning to see free range lamb, beef and pork making a very limited appearance just here and there. It is more expensive - but if we are among

those who can purchase the better cuts at all at current prices, we can move to free range and simply buy a smaller quantity to accommodate the higher cost.

Things change only when people speak up and refuse to accept what we know we should not be accepting. And this leads on to the next item, which is a happier one.

### **Court recognises that animals are sentient beings**

Last December, a Constitutional Court judgement recognised that the SPCA plays a vital role in the protection of animals and confirmed that it has the authority to carry out private prosecutions for cases involving animal cruelty.

Previously, cases would be investigated and evidence gathered, and then this would be referred to the National Prosecuting Authority, who would not necessarily decide to prosecute. Having lost both the original application and then the appeal to the High Court relating to two cases, the NSPCA applied to the Constitutional Court on the grounds that, in order to play its acknowledged role in preventing animal cruelty, the SPCA should have the power to carry out private prosecutions when the NPA declines to prosecute. This application was not opposed.

It is good to see that the Constitutional Court's unanimous judgement, written by Judge Sisi Khampepe, commenced with a quotation that animals are "companions, friends and brothers" to humans, and that the SPCA exists to protect their rights. The Court found that the SPCA has an obligation to uphold the Animal Protection Act and is, in fact, best placed to conduct private prosecutions when necessary.

It was further stated that animals are "sentient beings capable of suffering and of experiencing pain" and that the courts are now beginning to take account of this. The judge actually highlighted canned lion hunting and also the need for protection of biodiversity and also recognised the role of animal welfare under the Constitution, as well as the role of the SPCA in working to prevent cruelty to "our voiceless companions". Google for further details. Among other references, Groundup published a report by Safura Karim in February.

This judgement is a small step when one looks at the big picture, but it is a really important one. We all know that the longest journey begins with the first small step.

### **Can dogs read our thoughts?**

It often seems like it, and findings last year from a study at the University of Lincoln in the UK and the University of São Paulo in Brazil found that dogs can recognise human emotions by combining information from different senses. They are certainly very sensitive to our moods.

If I am feeling a bit down, Bonnie will jump up next to me and cuddle into my neck and lick my cheek. Dogs do pick up our emotions, and those who are interested in even more startling canine abilities should read accounts of his research by the eminent British pioneering biologist, Dr Rupert Sheldrake. Google him for a fascinating read. Many interviews are available online.

It is important that adopted dogs are 'matched' with their owners by seeing how they interact with each other on first meeting. This is not as way out as it sounds, because our SPCA 'Dog Whisperer', Richard Dladla, is very good at doing this. When I adopted Bonnie in 2004, I was also looking for a big dog and stopped in front of one of the kennels, but Richard said: "No, that dog must go to a home where there is no other dog. I

have the right dog to go with this little dog you have chosen.” (Well, Bonnie actually chose me. As soon as she saw me, she went into a flurry of “Take me! Take me!” barks and virtually did backward flips. She is the brightest, sweetest, most loving little creature. What a privilege to have her.)

Richard disappeared and came back with a magnificent Labrador, about two years old. This was my dear Gaby, who died at home in his old age of organ failure last year, loved to his last moment.

What remains a mystery to me is that when I just think of going for a swim in the pool, Bonnie begins to bark excitedly and rushes off to sit at the pool gate and wait for me to open it. And when I think of taking her out with me, she makes joyful little noises and, quivering with excitement, goes to sit at the chest of drawers where I keep her harness and leash.

I must somehow be giving her body language cues, but how on earth does she read them so accurately. She has a whole language of her own for different experiences.

### **Leap-frogging to remind people to care about frogs**

Frogs are among the most threatened animals in the world, and on 24 February, the fourth national Leap Day for Frogs in South Africa, over a thousand children ‘jumped for frogs’ on the Durban beachfront to help raise awareness for the essential role played by frogs in the environment.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust hoped to break the record for the biggest game of leapfrog ever. The record is presently held by New Zealand with 1,348 children leaping to focus attention on the vital role played by these little amphibians.

We at the Durban & Coast SPCA are aware of the need to educate children about frogs, since their vulnerability has been emphasised for us by our education officer’s coming across instances of the stoning of frogs and toads by pupils, with some teachers apparently not feeling that it is part of their duty to do anything about it. It is incidents like this that confirm for us the importance of our role in encouraging teaching about compassion.

Teachers can play a vital role in embedding their work, whatever the subject, in life-enhancing principles. Our SPCA Humane Education project covers a wide range of issues, but what is fundamental to them all is the need for caring and compassion towards all living creatures.