

Our responsibility towards animals

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Humans and animals

The coronavirus seems to have come from animals to us humans. There are many indications that point to a “jump” of this kind. From a purely biological causative angle, this would make the animals the cause of the Covid-19 pandemic. So, in future should we be afraid of animals? Or is it in fact, the converse, that animals are pressurised by us humans? Is the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus from its natural environment to be thought of as a (bio)logical reaction of the cornered animals?

The threat to wild animals from the effects of our global civilisation has been studied and known for decades. Species extinction also continues, despite the large number of programmes to save the wild fauna and their habitats. The threat to the biological balance from intensive livestock farming has entered the general consciousness to an even lesser degree but is no less real. The corona crisis is a wake-up call to examine this danger, to understand it and to do something about it.

Intensive livestock farming

The animal industry that has developed over the last 70 years or

so is based on the mechanisation of keeping, breeding and feeding livestock. Intensive livestock farming reduces the space and environment for each animal to the absolute minimum. The example we all know is the battery hen. Breeding is so carefully worked out via repeated hybridisation (and, increasingly, gene manipulation) that the whole animal is “programmed” in a single direction for egg production. The feed is a cocktail of optimised chemical components, often with hormone additives, which is calculated solely for maximising production. This system is used not only for hens but also for pigs, animals bred for fur or fish, and also for dairy cows and beef cattle. Hundreds of millions of animals are kept under industrial conditions. They are managed like “machines” but their nature is still that of living organisms. This means they are subject to a high degree of permanent stress and as a consequence, they are constantly on the edge of collapse. Massive amounts of antibiotics are used to avoid huge numbers of deaths. But there are outbreaks of bacteria and viruses which are simply produced from the immunological stress and can contaminate the environment, e.g. human beings.

Are there alternatives?

Industrialised intensive livestock farming has gone off the rails in a variety of ways. It does not respect humans or animals. It has a shocking environmental balance sheet, particularly through polluting air, water and soil with excrements. It can lead to antibiotic resistance and it is a ticking bio time bomb, for which the Covid pandemic might be only a warning shot. There is no sensible reason for not stopping this industrial intensive farming. The question is, what is the alternative? Is it good and realistic to try to renounce animal husbandry in favour of radical veganism? Is there a way back to the “idyllic world” of traditional animal husbandry? Or are their sustainable ways to live up to our responsibility towards animals? In particular, modern organic farming, and biodynamic research and practice, has developed approaches for integrated animal husbandry in the areas of rearing, breeding and feeding, which do not just reduce the damage but actually create added value.

Land-based animal husbandry

Animals live in close contact with their environment. For domestic animals, the primary concern is the

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flow of substances of which they are a part. On the one hand, there is an uptake of substances through the feed and on the other the output of substances in the dung. It is a matter of connecting these loose ends and setting up a healthy closed substance cycle. The feed comes from the farm's own land and the animals eat this for their maintenance and saleable products (meat, milk, eggs, etc.). The dung is processed on the farm, composted and returned to the soil as high-quality compost, increasing the soil fertility in both the short and longer-term. This creates a closed farm cycle. The animals are fully integrated in this, in fact due to their "ensoulment" of the substance flow they are actually the 'mover' of this cycle of life. The entire farm is set up in such a way that the different animals have enough feed with their dung supplying the correct manure for the farm. The knowledge and practice of this kind of integrated animal husbandry is subject to ongoing research and development. The positive feedback effect due to the farm's own manure production was measured bacteriologically and the authors called this the "homefield advantage" effect. A scientific field study has recorded a reduction of over half of greenhouse gas emissions on biodynamic soils in comparison to chemically fertilised soils. Practitioners know from generations of experience that a closed substance cycle due to integrated animal husbandry stabilises the farm and increases resilience, thus guaranteeing security of income at a medium level.

Animal welfare

Issues around keeping animals are referred to nowadays as animal welfare. This includes the housing and grazing systems which enable the animals' natural behaviour according to current behavioural research. Swiss agriculture is making



good progress in this respect. This should be emphasised, as the efforts for animal welfare are still often the opposite the maximum exploitation in intensive animal husbandry. For biodynamic farmers, the close relationship between man and animal is also important. Animals are sentient beings and careful regular contact with human beings is an enrichment for both parties. This gives rise to something like an emotional and biological anti-stress habitat. Beyond the personal level, this is a real contribution to a sustainable health potential for the whole of society.

Breeding our brother animal

Breeding efforts enable humans to have a strong influence on an animal variety within the given biological limits. Breeding can concentrate very one-sidedly such as on only egg production for the female hens. The males that are born are then of no use and are shredded or gassed by the millions in hatcheries. In breeds that are only produced for fattening, the female chicks are "worthless" and are destroyed the day they hatch. The alternative is the dual-purpose breed, where the females have a medium egg production and the males a medium meat production. Practical research in partnership with conscious consumers could launch highly promising programmes in this area.

Respectful treatment

The alternative to industrialised intensive animal husbandry is integrated animal husbandry. This is based on the most up-to-date scientific research and participative field research by many dedicated livestock owners. The ecological balance of integrated animal husbandry is positive, especially due to binding greenhouse gases in the soil humus. The social balance is positive because it gives rise to bacteriological and viral "health biotopes". The cultural balance is positive because the respect towards "brother animal" also supports human dignity and the respectful treatment of the whole natural world.

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