

Counting Animals

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Archives

March 27, 2013

Animals we use and abuse for food we do not eat

February 13, 2013

More cows harmed for cheese than for milk

November 20, 2012

Meat consumption and demand both in decline

October 9, 2012

Electoral politics and the meat industry

August 23, 2012

Meat consumption patterns by race and gender

July 12, 2012

Look who is talking animal welfare!

May 7, 2012

Meat industry advertising

February 6, 2012

How many animals does a vegetarian save?

Animals we use and abuse for food we do not eat

by Harish

Posted on March 27, 2013, 3:31 PM

We waste a lot of food in the United States. We grow food at the farm that the farmers sometimes cannot sell. We lose food during processing and transportation. We overstock food at retail stores and throw away whatever goes unsold. We leave food on our plates in restaurants and in our homes.

Sometimes, this thing that we call food is actually the remains of a sentient and cognitively agile animal who wanted to live but who we killed anyway to serve as our food. Most vegans and vegetarians would agree that no animal should have to suffer or die for our food. But, even most omnivores would agree that there is something deeply wretched about inflicting lifelong pain and misery and finally death on an animal for food we are *not* going to eat.

The following bar graph shows the percentage of the edible weight of animal products that enters the retail market as food but which is not eaten and is just thrown away into our landfills. There are two kinds of loss depicted in this graph: losses at the retail level and losses at the consumer level. Losses at the retail level arise due to overstocked inventory, prepared food that has to be thrown away if not purchased within a few hours (e.g., rotisserie chickens), expiration of “sell-by” dates, and half-a-dozen other reasons. Losses at the consumer level also occur for a variety of reasons including impulse buying, large portion sizes at restaurants, spoilage, expiration of “use-by” dates, and our habit of over-filling our plates at buffets and in our homes.

Percentage of the edible weight of animal products that enters the retail market as food but is *not* eaten

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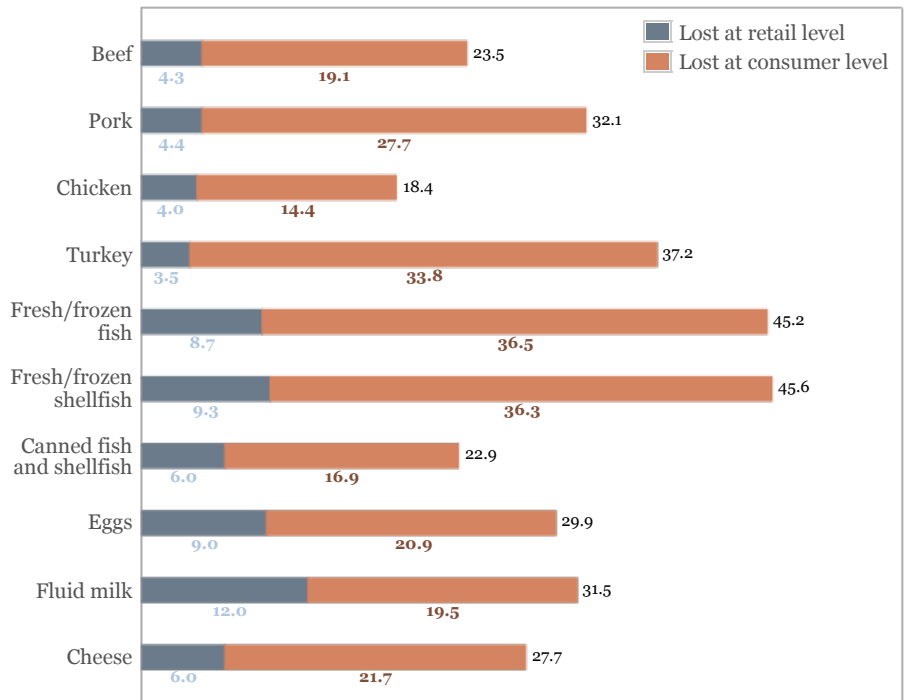
Vegan titles poised to overtake vegetarian?

July 11, 2011

Animal rights as contentious as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”

— *William Bruce Cameron, 1963*



Raw data source: Economic Research Service, USDA ([link](#))

The data used in the bar graph above are deduced from estimates used by the USDA in its [loss-adjusted food availability reports](#). The estimates of the losses at the consumer-level come from a [USDA-commissioned study](#) using the Nielsen Company's Homescan data on retail household purchases in the US and the [NHANES survey](#) of food consumption in the US. This data does not include losses before reaching the retail market such as at the farm or during processing, transportation or distribution.

The most significant factor in what gets wasted is whether or not it is perishable. The longer the shelf-life of a perishable food, the less likely it is to be wasted. Consumer-level waste depends also on whether the processing of a carcass happens at the consumer level with likely poorer efficiency. Fish and shellfish are more often trimmed, cut and processed at the consumer level in homes and restaurants; other meats are more likely to be processed before reaching the retail market. This is part of the reason that a larger percentage of fish and shellfish is wasted at the consumer level than of any other animal product.

There are several additional factors that play a role in what ends up eaten and what ends up in the landfill. Large portion sizes at restaurants mean that those animal products we are more likely to eat outside the home are also more likely to be wasted in larger quantities. The products that we more frequently use as ingredients in prepared

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6. Natural Resources Defense Council. *Wasted: How America Is Losing Up*

foods—such as eggs and cheese—are also more likely to be thrown away without being eaten. Foods that are more often eaten by children are also more likely wasted in larger quantities. Picky consumer expectations about exactly how “done” a meat should be can lead to waste; for example, **2 to 5% of red meat is thrown away at some restaurants** because it would be considered overcooked by the customer. Animals that are more often eaten during the holidays—such as turkeys—are left uneaten on our plates more often. Higher-income families waste more than lower-income families. It is a complex interplay of all of these and other factors that lead to the numbers in the bar graph above.

to 40 Percent of Its Food from Farm to Fork to Landfill. August 2012. ([link](#), accessed March 27, 2013)

Not only do we waste a larger percentage of fish and shellfish than of any other animal product, we also **use a larger number of them** than any other animal we use for food. Eliminating just half of the waste at just the consumer level could spare the lives of more than 15 billion fish and shellfish that are killed for the US food supply each year.

Even though we waste less of the chicken we buy than of any other animal product, we do **use chickens for food in larger numbers** than any other land animal. Eliminating just half of the waste at just the consumer level would spare the lives of over 500 million chickens used for their meat, over 35 million egg-laying hens, over 15 million pigs and over 3 million cows each year.

Now, it is worth examining the magnitude of these numbers more closely. Meat consumption has been on a steady decline since 2006. Eliminating just half of the food waste at just the consumer level, a not too far-fetched a goal, would spare at least as many additional animals each year as are being spared by the reduced meat consumption since 2006!

The idea for the topic of this post was suggested to me by my friend, Kenny Torrella. He makes the argument that this issue offers a compelling motivation for the animal advocacy movement to join forces with the environmental groups working on reducing food waste. This is an easy cause with wide support; **authors, environmental organizations** and some of our **government agencies** have all advocated reducing food waste in the United States. Even the food industry, led by the Grocery Manufacturer’s Alliance, has formed the **Food Waste Reduction Alliance** to increase food donations and decrease waste.

Most environmental campaigns around food waste do not consider the animals in their arguments. However, our use of animals for food and the hidden cruelty behind our plates, I think, adds significantly to the rationale for reducing waste. Certainly, to the hen who spends almost *all* her life cramped in a battery cage with not enough room to even spread her wings, it does not matter at all whether her eggs get eaten or end up in our landfills; she just wants to be freed from her suffering. The screaming pig about to be slaughtered does not care if we will eat his meat or throw it away; he just wants to live. But, *we* have to care because cutting waste in our food supply chain offers us an opportunity to substantially reduce the number of hens who will endure lifelong misery and the number of pigs who have to scream in vain for their lives.

All animals who die for our food die for nothing. Because we can thrive just fine without eating them. So, the tragedy of animal suffering today is no more poignant because hundreds of millions of animals suffer and die only to end up in our landfills instead of on our plates; the tragedy is that this waste simply adds to the already large number of animals we use, abuse and kill for no good purpose.