

Chickens, Globalisation and the Forest King

UK - Welfare groups have been saying for years that modern farming should give up the use of finely-tuned specialist chickens and go instead for hardier, dual-purpose animals, which produce both meat and eggs. Now the Veterinary College in Bangalore has come up with one such solution: the Forest King or Giri Raja.

Globally over 60 billion animals are farmed for food every year. The 2006 Report from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), "Livestock's Long Shadow", predicted that global meat consumption will more than double by 2050 (from 2001).

Where will all this meat come from? The short answer is: from chickens. Already, around 50 billion of that 60 billion figure IS poultry. Some represents turkeys, and ducks still provide a popular meat in eastern Asia, but the vast majority are chickens. Chicken meat is the fastest growth area within the global meat industry, writes Joyce D'Silva.

You would imagine that with chicken being so ubiquitous, it would represent a huge variety of breeds, each local in origin, adapted to local conditions and climate. You would be wrong. Over 90% come from breeds owned by just three multi-national breeding companies. Walk into a chicken shed in Britain, in North or South America, in Australia or India or China and you will find the same birds living in virtually identical conditions.

So why should that be a problem? Isn't globalised chicken production a shining example of a level playing field? Isn't it great that consumers in Beijing, Boston, Bangkok and Birmingham get equal access to the same product?

Let's look at how the system works. The poultry industry is the most vertically integrated meat business. Companies often control not just which chickens will be grown, but how they will be grown, what they will be fed and how much, what vaccines and medication will be used, what weight they should grow to in how many days – and ultimately they control the grower. (Farmer may not be the most appropriate word to use in this context.) The grower has become a sub-contractor and has lost flexibility over what type of chickens to grow and how they should be reared.

So the traditional independent small farmer has no role to play in this globalised market place. In fact the farmer of a small flock of local breed chickens simply cannot compete with the factory-farmed scale of production.

In animal welfare terms the story of the broiler (meat) chicken is one of the saddest and most problematic to solve. These are indoor chickens, kept in huge sheds on a floor spread with litter such as wood-shavings. The chickens are crowded together, often having 19 individuals to the square metre. Temperature, light and ventilation are

controlled.

These global chickens have been bred to grow at an astonishing rate – from fluffy day-old chick to slaughter-weight (just over 2 kilos) in less than 6 weeks. They would not reach puberty until around 18 weeks, so they are essentially just baby giants when they go to slaughter. Bred to have meaty breasts, (as that's where the best profits lie), they tend to tilt forward and walk in an ungainly fashion. Leg problems from carrying such a large body on an immature skeleton are common. A Defra survey found over a quarter of chickens suffering a significant degree of lameness. Some become so incapacitated that they can no longer walk to the feed and water outlets in their shed or cannot stretch up high enough to reach the contents. They are starve-outs and can only hope that the stockperson will put them out of their misery on the daily round.

We are told that chicken meat is the most environmentally friendly meat to produce. But a chicken shed housing 20,000 birds requires energy to run the automated systems on which it relies. The chickens' feed may contain a large amount of soya - probably imported from the deforested Amazon. The ammonia which forms such an intrinsic ambience inside a chicken factory farm has to go somewhere. It may not be a greenhouse gas, but it is known to contribute to acid rain. When the house is cleaned out between so-called "crops", the chicken litter can be rotted down to produce manure. If this process is not complete, and the litter is spread on grazing land, cattle have been known to develop botulism as a result.

Of course there are farmers who keep their chickens in enriched indoor conditions, with more room to move, straw bales to perch on and cabbages to muck about with and peck at. Some allow their chickens to go free range. Others feed only organic feed. But they too often rely on the same fast-growing breeds. The truth is that these mass-produced chickens are not really hardy enough to thrive in adverse weather conditions. They are in fact invalids-in-the-making and may do better in the carefully controlled conditions of the factory farm. (Of course reliance on electricity to run the ventilation and other automated systems is probably unwise in countries where electricity supply is subject to frequent breakdowns.)

In terms of global justice, factory farming of chickens does little for justice to farmers or to chickens. But it does make great profits for the breeding companies and is valuable to supermarket chains who like to run the £2.00 chicken as a loss-leader.

Whilst the big chicken companies are spreading globally at a rate of knots, their operations in developing or transition countries are unlikely to raise the standard of living of many small farmers. The first KFC to open in Bangalore in India was burned down by outraged local farmers who said their livelihoods had been ruined.

Whilst the broiler chickens are busy turning soya into muscle, their cousins, the laying hens, are living out their miserable lives in barren battery cages, producing an egg most days but never experiencing the pleasure of doing this quietly in their own DIY nest.

Although British consumers are turning their backs on cages, most eggs globally are still from caged hens.

The Exciting Forest King

Welfare groups have been saying for years that modern farming should give up the use of finely-tuned specialist chickens, split into meat and egg producing flocks, just as they should move away from high-yielding Holstein dairy cows and massive Belgian Blue beef cattle and go instead for hardier, dual-purpose animals, which produce both meat and eggs/milk.

Now the Veterinary College in Bangalore has come up with one such solution: the Forest King or Giri Raja. This is a magnificent-looking chicken which has been bred to be dual-purpose. It thrives on a scavenging diet, grows to a good weight and the females are useful egg producers. It is totally unsuitable for the hot-house conditions of the factory farm.

Now the local small farmers around Bangalore are queuing up for the chicks. In fact the university is having trouble meeting demand. The Dean promises they won't sell their secret to the big breed companies. They want the Giri Raja to be a showcase and an example that can be imitated round the world to the benefit of those poorer farmers who cannot compete with the big boys.

So let's celebrate the Giri Raja and let's call for lots of imitators round the world. Let's look on this fantastic breed as signalling one of the first big steps in loosening the control of the multi-national breeders and the promotion of humane and sustainable farming.

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