



What is animal welfare when it comes to organic?

» By Jan Nary

ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL AND US

Recent decades have seen increasing changes in the way we farm livestock. Bucolic images of traditional farms have given way to battery hens, feed lot cattle, intensive pig farming in pens of concrete and steel and other husbandry practices which, while they might enhance the speed and profitability of farming, are causes of concern for consumers who care about animal welfare. They constitute a substantial demographic; research has indicated that of thirteen motivators behind food choice, animal welfare ranks in the top five¹. Fortunately, there is an ethical option for the concerned shopper.

What is organic animal welfare?

There are still some misconceptions about what is organic when it comes to animal welfare. Free range chicken is often mistaken to be the same thing; the difference between cage-free and organic eggs is also little understood. Meanwhile, little is known by the average shopper as to what constitutes organic pork or fish or honey.

The fact is that buying food that is certified organic ensures that any animals involved have been handled under some of the most stringent protection regulations in the world.

The Australian Organic Standard² takes the quantum step into addressing the welfare of any animals involved in food production as well as addressing the issues of food safety and integrity, nutrition, sustainability, and environment protection.

Chicken and the egg

Battery chickens bred for eggs were one of the first issues to catch public attention. Stories of hens, beloved icons of many a childhood storybook, being de-beaked, closely confined and subjected to extended hours of artificial light, along with concerns over chemical additives used in feed and in processing, resulted in an increased consumer demand for organic and free-range chickens and eggs.

The market responded, but to a degree where the consumer is now faced with a bewildering array of choices. Shelf upon

supermarket shelf of eggs - free-range eggs, barn-laid eggs, organic eggs, omega3 eggs, vegetarian eggs - and in the meat section there are free-range chickens, barn-fresh chickens, natural chickens, corn-fed chickens..... There are various standards (some of which are voluntary) for chicken production and labeling; they vary significantly and shoppers have to juggle priorities of cost, health benefits, environmental impact and respect for the rights of the animal.

For many consumers, buying certified organic is the way to go. The certified organic label is immediate reassurance about the fowls' diet (free forage and organically grown food with no added "nasties") and the treatment the bird has received. The organic standard prohibits debeaking, comb and toe removal, battery production, overcrowding and the use of poly peepers (permanent blindfolds). Organic chickens take 65-80 days to grow (as compared to the growth promotant-fuelled 35-40 days taken by a conventionally reared bird) and the results, in terms of taste and texture, are well worth the wait.

Better husbandry

The organic standard for ruminant livestock production - pigs, sheep, goats and beef cattle - reflects the same level of care and responsibility, which comes down to good, sustainable husbandry practice. Any animal may only be subjected to medical intervention as necessary and under certain guidelines. Surgical interventions such as dehorning are covered by specific rules; some are prohibited and those that are allowed must be carried out with a minimum of suffering to the animal. The apiary section prohibits the clipping of bees' wings.

Transporting stock must be done humanely, with attention to transport times, feeding and watering en route and fitness of the animal for travel.

Open living spaces

The standard requires that animals be able to live, grow and breed naturally in groups appropriate to the species, have free access to pasture, shade and shelter, and be protected from predators.

Cattle feed lots are out, along with

batteries for hens and pigs, and stock population densities are proscribed. Aquaculturalists must design their operations with specific attention to the needs and natural habits of their fish stock.

Proof is in the organic pudding

Among the many advantages for consumers in buying and eating organic is the better flavour and guaranteed integrity of the food. The standard ensures that certified animals are raised on food that contains no hormones, growth promotants, antibiotics, animal by-products or preservatives.

Stock must be reared in an environment

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