ONE GLASS AT A TIME!

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Cows and Goats in the Dairy Industry

It is easy to understand the popularity of dairy foods. Subsidized by the government, the dairy industry has long promoted cow’s milk as a mealtime staple, further perpetuated by USDA diet guidelines. Moreover, many consumers consider ice cream to be a comfort food. And cheese—well, people seem to be obsessed with cheese. But beneath the glossy exterior of expensive marketing and food pyramids is a deeply troubling reality that the public rarely sees.

Cows and goats, the animals most commonly exploited for dairy products, suffer immense physical and emotional cruelty so humans can take and consume their milk. Like humans, cows produce milk solely to nourish their babies, and left to themselves, the mother would nurse her baby for six to nine months. The two gentle animals, mother and her offspring, are closely bonded and normally remain together in the same herd. A cow’s natural lifespan is 20 years or more.[1]

In the dairy system, however, the cow’s tail is cut off[2] and her horns are removed with a hot iron or caustic paste[3] (generally without pain killers), her ears are tagged, and, upon reaching reproductive maturity (about 2 years old), she is forcibly impregnated through artificial insemination.[4] She will carry her calf for nine months, and after giving birth, she will be separated from her baby, even on so-called "humane" farms. Confused and distraught by the other’s absence, they will sadly call to each other, often for weeks.

If the newborn calf is female, she will probably be placed in a tiny enclosure, fed a synthetic milk alternative, and eventually exploited by the dairy industry, just like her mother, though some dairies send them to slaughterhouses. If the calf is male, he will either be sold to be raised for "meat" or might simply be shot.
With the mother cow now lactating, she will be hooked up to a machine that applies a constant vacuum to her teats and can lead to a painful infection called mastitis, with pockets of pus on her udder. In addition to mastitis, cows suffer a variety of physical problems in the dairy industry, especially difficulty walking, which is usually caused by standing on the concrete flooring of industrial dairies.

In about five years, after enduring multiple cycles of impregnation and having her baby taken away, and with the production of milk from her exhausted body declining, the mother cow is no longer of value to the dairy farmer. She will be forced to endure transport to a slaughterhouse (again, even from “humane” farms), where she will suffer the traumatic fate of nearly all cows in the dairy industry: she will be killed for low-quality "ground beef," such as you might find in a cheap fast food burger.

**Goats**

Likewise, goats in the wild form strong bonds with their family members. And like cows and humans, a goat’s milk is intended for her babies.

In nature, goats live in mountain grasslands where they spend most of their time in social herds wandering the landscape and eating. Like cows, goats are far-ranging ruminants, but they browse rather than graze, preferring to nibble vines, shrubbery, and weeds instead of chewing grass. Intelligent, inquisitive, and playful, goats will thoroughly explore anything new or unfamiliar in their surroundings.

Raising goats for milk has become a popular option for small-scale and part-time dairy farmers. Many of the same cruelties suffered by cows are inflicted upon goats used for milk, including artificial insemination, painful mutilation (the removal of their horns), and separating the mother from her babies (kids), who are given a milk replacer instead of being allowed to nurse.

Goat milk is a small industry in the United States, so goat dairies tend to be significantly smaller than cow-based dairies. In countries with larger commercial goat dairies, such as Australia and India, both of which export goat milk to the U.S., goats may be intensively housed and unable to express their natural behaviors, leading to frustration and distress. Moreover, a 2019 investigation of one Australian goat dairy revealed newborn goats screaming in pain as their horns were burned off, while at another dairy, newborn males were bludgeoned to death in front of their mothers, since the males are considered "surplus."
The dairy industry is notorious for pushing back against environmental regulations. In California, for example, the biggest dairy-producing state in the country, the industry successfully blocked methane regulation for a decade. But in 2016, California passed a law requiring dairies to cut methane emissions 40 percent by 2030. That's a rare (and hopeful) victory for the environment, which suffers enormously due to dairies. Greenhouse gases (GHGs) are among the biggest problems, since they warm the Earth and contribute to climate change. GHGs—primarily methane, nitrous oxide, and carbon dioxide—are produced at different stages of the dairy process. First, cows expel methane when they digest the grain and grass they eat, mostly through burps.

After their food has been digested, cows produce manure, which emits nitrous oxide as well as more methane. A cow of average size will produce some 120 pounds of manure every day. On large dairies, this manure (as well as cow urine) is collected in massive holding areas called pits or lagoons and can lead to a variety of ecological problems. Manure runoff from dairies can seep into watersheds, for example, contaminating water supplies with bacteria such as E. coli and Streptococcus and even creating algae blooms in lakes, ponds, and the ocean that block sunlight, suck up oxygen, and kill fishes. Farmers also spray the manure onto nearby fields, and the toxic mix gets carried into neighboring areas.

Another GHG created by dairies is carbon dioxide, which is exhaled by cows as they digest food and is produced by other dairy industry activities, such as the use of fossil fuels and clearing land to grow feed crops for cows. Although carbon dioxide from fossil fuels contributes to climate change, methane from cows is actually 25 times more potent than carbon dioxide in warming the atmosphere, and a single cow will belch out about 220 pounds of methane every day. Nitrous oxide, meanwhile, is 300 times more potent than carbon dioxide.
According to a study by the National Academy of Sciences released in 2021, agricultural production in the United States results in an estimated 17,900 air quality-related deaths per year. "Of those, 80% are attributable to animal-based foods, both directly from animal production and indirectly from growing animal feed," says the report. Emissions from these animal enterprises kill more people in the U.S. each year than particle pollution from coal plants (about 13,000).

Dairies (and other animal agriculture operations) also use a lot of water. And on a planet where fresh water is a critical resource, this is enormously problematic. Each cow will drink an average of 17 gallons per day, so a 2,000-cow dairy farm is using 34,000 gallons of water a day just to keep the animals hydrated—enough to fill a large swimming pool (18 x 36 x 7 feet). And that’s just the water for cow consumption. Dairies also use water for milk cooling, cleaning and sanitizing equipment, cow cooling, irrigating crops, moving manure, cleaning the buildings, and other necessities. By one estimate, the dairy industry uses nearly 5,000 gallons of water per cow every day!

Sadly, the misery of dairy farms is shared by neighboring communities, which are plagued by polluted water, poisoned air, contaminated soil, and flies. While living near a dairy would hardly be anyone’s first choice, many Black, Brown, and Indigenous people often have few options.

Locating dairies (and other animal farms) near Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities is a form of environmental racism. These residents are perceived as lacking the political capacity to resist and are thus forced to disproportionately shoulder the negative socio-economic, environmental, and health-related effects of having to live near an industrial-scale animal farm.

One of the biggest complaints from dairy neighbors is the poor quality of the air, which may be affected by ammonia, dust, hazardous air pollutants, and hydrogen sulfide, which smells like rotten eggs. In the San Joaquin Valley of California, for instance, the largest dairy-producing state in the U.S., the population is 49 percent Latinx, and one in six children has asthma—a consequence that has been directly linked to the region’s dairy farms. Local residents also hear the upsetting cries of separated cows and their calves.
Workers in the Dairy Industry

Dairy workers—the people who feed and milk the cows, clean their stalls, and perform a variety of other physically demanding farm tasks—are among the most mistreated laborers in the U.S. workforce. They put in long hours, earn low wages, often live in substandard housing, and face a variety of work-related health risks, including serious injury and even death. Indeed, the dairy industry has one of the highest rates of human injuries and fatalities within agriculture.[32] Among countless other dangers, workers drown in manure pits,[33] are killed by farm machinery,[34] die from falls,[35] are crushed to death by cows,[36] and perish beneath hay bales.[37]

Due to their exposure to a variety of toxic chemicals, gases, and volatile organic compounds, dairy workers also run an increased risk of developing chronic respiratory diseases, neurological disorders, and cancers, including leukemia; non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma; multiple myeloma; soft-tissue sarcoma; and cancers of the lip, stomach, brain, and prostate.[38]

More than half of dairy workers are immigrants,[39] and many of them are undocumented, making them especially exploitable and vulnerable to abuse by their employers. A report on dairy workers in New York State interviewed many who were bullied, threatened, and had experienced wage theft. They were forced to work 12 hours a day, six days a week. "They treated us like slaves," said one worker who was fired after he tried to organize a workers’ committee to address health and safety issues in the workplace. "We all have rights, but because we are farmworkers, they treat us like that."[40]

A study of dairies in California found workers forced to put in 16-hour days, seven days a week. Workers were denied meal breaks and earned no overtime pay. Some workers were verbally and physically assaulted.[41] In New Mexico, where milk is the number-one agricultural commodity,[42] an investigation found that dairy workers who'd suffered an injury requiring them to take time off found they had no job to return to once they'd healed.[43] Moreover, state law does not require dairies to provide their workers with breaks or meal periods.
Colonization

Food is a principal tool of colonization, which is the practice of acquiring control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically. We can see this in how the descendants of colonizers continue to force dairy products upon the Indigenous people of North America.

One instructive example is the Mojave people of what is now Arizona, California, and Colorado. Their ancestral diet was primarily plant-based; they grew beans, corn, melons, and pumpkins. The Mojaves were not used to cow’s milk, which they said was poisonous[^44]. In 1911, a physician with the U.S. government (which by this time was "administering" the reservations where many Indigenous people were forced to live) called the Mojaves "willfully ignorant and hopelessly lazy" because they refused to give their children milk[^45]. Yet the Mojaves had no ability to digest cow’s milk—indeed, it made them sick—so they were perfectly correct to say it was poisonous. From the U.S. government’s viewpoint, however, feeding the Indigenous people dairy foods was just another step toward "civilizing" them with a "superior" European diet—a diet they hoped would instill "American" values in the Mojaves and other native peoples.

The colonization of the Americas was a gradual process, and when Columbus first arrived in 1492, he and his fellow Europeans did not find the foods they were used to, such as bread, olives, "meat," and milk. They feared they could not survive on the unfamiliar diet the locals ate—or worse, that their bodies might somehow cease to be European[^46]. So when Columbus returned in 1493, he brought sheep, pigs, and cows from Europe[^47]. At last, the colonizers believed, their bodies would be sustained on "superior" foods—and they could force the Indigenous people to adopt the "right" way of eating.

Not only does this attitude go back centuries, but it is still reflected in current practices. Although studies show that "as many as 75 percent of all African American, Jewish, Native American, and Mexican American adults, and 90 percent of Asian American adults" unable to digest lactose[^48] (a sugar found in dairy), the U.S. government and the dairy industry continue to push dairy consumption on these populations.*

In the 1920s and ’30s, dairy promoters went so far as to link the whiteness of milk with the alleged purity of the white race, proclaiming, for example, "Of all races, the Aryans seem to have been the heaviest drinkers of milk and the greatest users of butter and cheese, a fact that may in part account for the quick and high development of this division of human beings."[^49]

*Because it is not natural to consume the milk of another species, Food Empowerment Project refers to people who are unable to digest lactose as "lactose normal." In addition, lactose intolerance implies there is something "wrong" with Black, Brown and Indigenous people who are not able to digest milk—a product of colonization.
In the mid-20th century, the dairy food company PET Milk began a marketing campaign for their baby formula that targeted Black women, suggesting it was healthier than breast milk. It became a myth that is perpetuated today, and only 12 percent of Black mothers still breastfeed at six months, compared to 26 percent of Latinx mothers and 24 percent of white mothers. These racial disparities correspond with infant mortality, which strikes more than twice as many Black babies as white babies—a ratio that has remained consistent since slavery.⁵⁰

Food has always been a fundamental tool in colonization, and the legacy of dairy in North America has been particularly difficult for Black, Brown, and Indigenous people. For anyone looking to remove the influence of colonization—as well as help animals, the environment, and exploited workers—moving away from milk and other dairy products is a great place to start.

Please choose vegan!

If you haven’t already done so, a good way to begin adopting a vegan diet is to gradually replace the animal-based foods you’re used to with healthy plant-based foods.

And you can start with dairy!

Fortunately, there is a growing number of delicious, nutritious dairy-free products available today. Consumers can now choose milk, cheeses, frozen desserts, spreads, yogurts, sour creams, coffee creamers, whipped toppings, and more made from oats, peas, soy, coconuts, almonds, hemp, rice, and other alternatives. Many of these plant-based options are found in the dairy case of grocery stores.

For more information, please visit: foodispower.org/veganism