

**Cows In Their Natural Environment**  
From [FEP Food Empowerment Project](#)  
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In nature, the relatives of domesticated cows roam the grasslands, deserts, scrublands, and forests of every continent except Antarctica. The Bovidae family includes more than 140 species such as bison, antelope, gazelles, goats, and sheep. From season to season, these animals' survival depends on their intelligence, endurance, and keen senses.

Most domesticated cows can be traced back to a single common ancestor: the aurochs. Now extinct, the aurochs was native to the forests of Southwest Asia. Although domesticated cows have been selectively bred for thousands of years, their basic anatomy, physiology, and behavior are nearly identical to their ancient ancestor.



Cupid. Photo by In Her Image Photography, Farm Sanctuary.

As strict herbivores, they spend much of their time grazing in herds never more than a few miles from water. They are crepuscular feeders, eating primarily at sunrise and sunset. In cold weather conditions, cows will huddle together to share their body heat. In hot weather, they spend much of the day lying in the shade and ruminating, a specialized digestive process that allows cows to eat large quantities of food and digest it later while lying hidden in the vegetation.

Cows and their ancestors, like all mammals, produced milk for one reason: to nourish their offspring. While there are many important factors in a calf's development, nothing is more vital than milk. As with all mammals, a cow's milk contains a unique assortment and proportion of nutrients customized specifically for her calf's initial survival and proper growth.

Only when a cow is allowed to live a natural life can her true nature be observed. After nine months of pregnancy, the cow leaves the herd in search of a secluded location to give birth. In the minutes after birth, the bond between a cow and her calf is undeniably strong. From this day forward, her time and energy are devoted almost exclusively to protecting and nurturing her calf.

Instinctively, the mother licks her calf's fur to stimulate circulation and facilitate nursing. Considering that most calves weigh between 80 and 100 pounds at birth, the cleaning process can last for hours. Over the next several months, the calf will frequently suckle from their mother and will grow at a rate of more than 2 pounds per day.<sup>[1]</sup> This rate of their growth requires a very specific ratio of fat, protein, and carbohydrates. A cow's milk contains fewer carbohydrates, about the same amount of fat, and more than three times the protein of a human's milk.<sup>[2, 3]</sup>

Historically, cows have been revered by many cultures for their extremely gentle demeanor and caring instincts. The bond between a mother and her calf is as strong as any parent-child bond. Adults also form strong bonds as they spend many hours each day foraging, ruminating, and grooming each other. Over time, the herd grows to include several generations of relatives, with the oldest members being more than 20 years old.<sup>[4]</sup> Cows, like all animals (human and non-human), live their lives striving to avoid pain, seeking pleasure, and forming bonds with those in their communities.

### **Cows On Animal Farms**

On animal farms, cows are thoroughly exploited for their milk. Their instinctual needs and desires have been manipulated and suppressed to maximize milk production for human consumption. In order to

consistently produce milk, cows must be forcibly and repeatedly impregnated through artificial insemination.<sup>[5]</sup> After nine months of pregnancy, a calf is born.

Within a day of birth (sometimes hours) the calf is taken away from their mother, never to be reunited. This happens on both large dairy farms as well as on smaller and so-called “[humane](#)” farms. Both the mother and her calf are extremely traumatized by the separation and have been known to cry out for each other for hours, days, or even weeks after being forced apart. Some video footage shows the mother and her offspring frantically fighting to be together.

### About Their Babies

Although some dairies send them to slaughterhouses, the female\* calves are most often raised for milk production, just like their mothers. At a time when they should be nourished by their mother’s milk, the infant calves who are raised for milk production are isolated in individual enclosures. After several weeks they are moved to small groups where each calf has as little as 35 square feet.<sup>[6]</sup> Throughout their adolescence they are ironically fed a synthetic milk replacement while their mothers’ milk, considered too valuable for those whom it was intended for, is sold as a human commodity.



Photo courtesy of Viva!USA

The male calves are most often sold to be raised for “meat” after being separated from their mothers. Some are raised for the production of “veal,” which is considered a “gourmet meat” in upscale restaurants and supermarkets. They too are denied their mother’s nourishing milk and comforting affection. Their brief lives are spent confined in individual crates that are so small the young calves are unable to take a step, turn around, or even stretch their limbs. In these conditions, their muscles remain in an indefinite state of atrophy. They are fed a liquid diet that is intentionally deficient in iron, in an effort to make their flesh a pale gray color. At 16–20 weeks old, they are slaughtered and sold as a “delicacy.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Alternatively, about 15% of the calves are raised as “Bob’ veal” and slaughtered within 3 weeks of birth.<sup>[8]</sup> They are often auctioned off for slaughter with their umbilical cords still wet.

It is important to note that the “veal” industry is a direct result of the dairy industry. The USDA itself states that “the primary source of vealers in the United States is the dairy industry.”<sup>[9]</sup> If cows were not forcibly impregnated and then separated from their babies in order for humans to consume their milk, there would not be thousands of male calves sent to their deaths for “veal.”<sup>[10]</sup>



Fortunately, “veal” consumption in the U.S. has been declining over the years.<sup>[11]</sup> However, as a result, male calves born to dairy cows are increasingly sent to become “dairy beef.” They are slaughtered at 12–14 months old, meaning they are still killed for “meat” when they are very young.<sup>[7]</sup>

In other cases, the male calves are outright killed soon after they are born.

### **The Manipulation Of Cows**

Over the past several decades, milk production has become highly mechanized and scientifically refined for human consumption. Annual milk production per cow has risen from 4,572 pounds in 1944 to 23,391 pounds in 2019.<sup>[12, 13]</sup> This staggering increase is due to several factors, including selective breeding, high-protein feed, mechanized milking and the more recent trend of injecting the cows with rBST, also known as bovine growth hormones (BGH). Due to potential impacts on the health of humans and cows, the use of these synthetic hormones was banned in the European Union and Canada in 1999.<sup>[14, 15, 16]</sup> However, the U.S. continues to allow the injection of rBST into cows.<sup>[17]</sup>



Photo courtesy of Viva!USA

The most “cost-effective” way to extract such an unnatural volume of milk from a cow is for her to be hooked up to a machine that applies a constant vacuum to her teats, multiple times a day over a 10–12 month period. The method and frequency of milking commonly causes teat lesions that leave the cows at an increased risk for mastitis (painful inflammation of the mammary gland).<sup>[18]</sup> 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.<sup>[19]</sup> Each year in the U.S. alone, more than 9 million cows are milked to the point of exhaustion.<sup>[12]</sup>

Cows raised for milk also endure painful mutilations such as tail docking – a practice in which up to two-thirds of their tail is cut off, usually without anesthetics.<sup>[20]</sup> The industry claims this is necessary for udder health and overall cleanliness; however, without a tail, the cows are unable to protect themselves from flies and other bacteria-harboring vectors. Tail docking is so cruel that California, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Ohio have all banned this mutilation (although each state allows it in some capacity for

emergency, “medically necessary” or “veterinary” purposes).<sup>[21]</sup> In addition to tail docking, the vast majority of dairies de-horn the cows. Common methods of de-horning include applying caustic pastes, “scooping” out their horns, or searing them with a hot iron.<sup>[22]</sup>

After being forced to produce unnatural quantities of milk for 2.5–4 years straight, enduring multiple cycles of impregnation and having their babies taken away, cows’ rate of milk production begins to decline.<sup>[23]</sup> No longer considered valuable to the milk industry, they are slaughtered and processed into lean ground “beef” used mostly for hamburgers.

The process of transporting cows from a feedlot to a slaughterhouse is extremely stressful. Like many animals, cows have an innate fear of unfamiliar surroundings. Current laws allow transporters to travel up to 28 consecutive hours without a rest period. The 28-hour period can be extended to 36 hours by simply submitting a written request.<sup>[24]</sup> During this time, the cows are deprived of food and water, and vomiting and diarrhea are common due to hours of vibration and maneuvering.

When they arrive at the slaughterhouse, they pass through a chute that starts out wide, then narrows. Each individual is placed in a “stunning box” designed to restrain them so they can be stunned. The goal is to penetrate their brain but not sever their brain stem. If their brain stem were severed, then their heart would stop pumping blood and the cow would not bleed out as quickly or completely. The tool most commonly used for this procedure is a captive bolt pistol. The pistol is placed firmly against their forehead and fired. A pointed bolt penetrates their brain causing the cow to spasm uncontrollably, and then collapse.

Not all cows are stunned during this process; a study found that approximately 16% of cows at a slaughterhouse may be inadequately stunned. This means that they may be shot in the head multiple times, and even then some are still conscious when they are killed.<sup>[25]</sup> After being shackled by their hind legs and raised off the ground, their throat is cut, and an incision is made from their neck to their abdomen. As if being slaughtered weren’t already terrifying enough, many cows regain some degree of consciousness during the bleeding process. [Workers who are forced to perform this horrific procedure must be careful not to stand too close as the struggling animals flail their limbs.](#)

Each year, a startling number of U.S. cows who are used for dairy production arrive at the slaughterhouse too sick, injured, or weak to even stand. Referred to as “downers,” they are either euthanized or left alone to die. Until 2008 these cows were commonly pushed or dragged into the slaughterhouses using chains or forklifts. Although there is now a law prohibiting this practice, time will tell if it is necessarily enforced or regularly followed.<sup>[26]</sup> According to the USDA, 23,000 dairy operations reported “downer” cows in 2004.<sup>[27]</sup> Like all other farmed animals, cows are not even protected under the already unsubstantial federal Animal Welfare Act.

Animal farms have strategically converted something necessary for cows to live and thrive into a product that symbolizes exploitation. Millions of cows endure a life of confinement, physical exhaustion, separation anxiety, and a collective indifference to their suffering.

## **Dairy And Colonization**

Dairy is also a legacy of colonization (to learn more about this important topic, see our page on [Colonization, Food, and the Practice of Eating](#)), given that Columbus brought cows on the second voyage to the Americas. The colonizers believed that their bodies would be then sustained on “superior” European foods including dairy—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. While as many as three-quarters of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people are lactose normal\*\* – or unable to digest lactose (a sugar found in dairy) – the U.S. government and the dairy industry continue to push dairy consumption on these populations.<sup>[28]</sup> Food Empowerment Project finds the lack of vegan milks in communities that lack access to healthy foods to be a form of [food apartheid](#).

## The Harm Of Animal Farms

Animal farms operate based on a theory of minimal care for individual animals. At every stage, the animal's true nature is manipulated, suppressed, and disregarded in an effort to drive down costs and maximize profit. Producing milk, “meat,” and other animal products as cheaply as possible has many devastating implications for the animals. Millions of years of evolution and countless adaptations are largely ignored because they would decrease the efficiency of production.

## What You Can Do

**Go vegan:** If you have access to healthy foods, choose a [vegan](#) lifestyle. Going vegan (including refraining from wearing skin such as “leather”) is one of the most direct ways to help end these cruel practices and the suffering of cows, other non-human animals, and the workers exploited by the animal agriculture industry.

*\*Note: We are using the terminology “male” and “female” because it is the language we have available at this time to describe how the industry exploits non-human animals based on their assigned sex. We recognize that humans and non-human animals do not fall into a binary of only two biological sexes.*

*\*\*Note: Instead of “lactose intolerant,” we say “[lactose normal](#)” to refer to people whose bodies do not digest the milk of a non-human animal. F.E.P. recognizes that the term “lactose intolerant” is problematic given that it implies people, who happen to be predominantly Black, Brown, and Indigenous, have something wrong with them if they do not digest lactose.*

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