

‘Humane Hoax’ Editor Hope Bohanec On The Fallacy of ‘Happy’ Farmed Animals

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When labels like “organic,” “humane certified,” “cage-free,” and “family farm” started inundating animal agriculture advertising in the early 2000s, author Hope Bohanec decided to do some investigating.

Bohanec — whose care for the environment emboldened her as a young adult to tree sit to save California redwoods, and whose love of animals inspired her to go vegetarian at age 16 and vegan at age 20 — toured farms whose animal-derived products were sporting the new labels.

She was shocked by what she saw.

“I thought I was going to see what you’d see going to a farm sanctuary,” she told Lady Freethinker (LFT) via Zoom. “But instead I saw pretty much the same conditions as conventional farms. Birds were still debeaked and overcrowded. Dairy cows still had swollen udders and were injured and limping.”

Her revelations catalyzed her to write a book, *The Ultimate Betrayal*, exposing what advocates now refer to as “humane washing” – strategic marketing that causes customers to perceive that animals used for food are being treated well, when in reality they are not.

When the animal farming industry continued to push labels to an increasingly receptive but arguably misled audience, Bohanec rallied more than a dozen engaging and eloquent voices — from animal rescuers, activists, and climate experts to professors and poets — to counter the myths.

At almost 400 pages, *The Humane Hoax: Essays Exposing the Myth of Happy Meat, Humane Dairy, and Ethical Eggs* is a big book tackling big and often unseen issues — from the cruelties inherent in the do-it-yourself backyard egg business to a newly applauded movement in which women “find themselves” by killing sentient animals.

But as an anthology, each essay can be read in a single sitting — giving you a lot to ponder without needing to carve out huge chunks of time, and written in a way that keeps omnivores and vegans alike reading.

“The essays in this book aren’t an ‘in your face’ assault but rather a collection of well-written and thoughtful pieces that call for deep reflection that might move some people out of their comfort zones,” [wrote](#) acclaimed author and ecologist Marc Bekoff. “If that happens, in my opinion, the book has achieved one of its major goals.”

The Humane Hoax is dedicated to Kukkuta, a sweet chicken who came into Bohanec’s life in an unexpected way. But to learn more about that — you’ll have to read the book.

You can order a copy of [The Humane Hoax](#) here. To learn more about Bohanec’s work and these issues, you can visit the landing page for her nonprofit organization [Compassionate Living](#), listen to her “[Hope for Animals](#)” podcast, or check out the book [The Ultimate Betrayal: Is There Happy Meat?](#)

Answers in the Q & A below have been condensed and edited for length.

A Q&A with Author and Activist Hope Bohanec



Image Courtesy of Hope Bohanec

Tell us more about your connection to animals and how your advocacy shifted over time?

I have always loved animals. When I was a little girl, I would put their pictures all over my walls. When people asked me what I was going to do when I grew up, I would tell them that I was going to work with

animals. As a teenager, I learned about the plight of farmed animals. To me, they were the most vulnerable and non-human oppressed beings on earth and that drew me to their cause.

To me, it seems like certain media still promote a one-sided narrative that romanticizes animal agriculture while ignoring animal welfare issues — especially with some of the newer labels out there. Has that been your experience?

I've noticed that with "small-scale" and "regenerative" farming, the media often offers stories along the lines of "Look at the good things happening in the industry." But unfortunately, the reality for the animals is that their experience is largely unchanged, and often new problems created.

Just like in conventional farming, there is still separation of baby animals from their mothers, painful body mutilations, and slaughter at a young age. But when animals are taken out of confinement and put out on pasture, there are new issues of predation, parasites, viruses, and exposure to the elements, and there is still a heavy environmental impact.

But none of that is addressed.

There are so many labels out there now: "All natural," "organic," "grass-fed," "cage-free," "humane certified," "free-range" being just a few. Can you give an example of why these labels are problematic?

"Cage-free" is getting to be very popular. It's frustrating, because it's only two words that lead to a lot of assumptions, and it's this way with all of the labels that are misleading and misrepresenting the reality of these animals' lives.

"Cage-free" deals with the size of confinement, but there are so many other cruelties that these hens face. From debeaking, overcrowding, being hatched in a metal drawer at a hatchery and never knowing their mother hen, never seeing the light of day or feeling the sun on their wings, and going to a brutal slaughter at a young age — none of that changes with a cage-free label.

What happens is all the welfare concerns get funneled into these two words — cage free — and suddenly people see that label and they think these hens must be living a happy and stress-free life. But that's not the reality.

The animal agriculture industry knows that the consumer is going to make a lot of assumptions about these very few words. They want you to believe that it's more environmental, that the animals are happier, that it's a healthier product. That is the story they are trying to portray. But what's the reality? The reality is very different; the reality for these animals — these cows, these chickens — is stark.

Why did you decide to focus your work now on addressing these labels?

A lot of people say to me, "Why are you focusing on this small number of animals? It's just a few animals. Why don't you focus on the many more animals in the industrial farms, the CAFOS (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations)?" My answer to that is it's not just a few animals; it does impact large numbers of animals. Some of these farms have tens of thousands of birds in these barns. When there is a label, like "Certified Humane," people think it's small-scale or a small farm, but that is not necessarily the case at all. The big, industrial farms use these labels also. I go into great detail about this and give examples in the book *The Humane Hoax* about these farms that use this "humane" labeling.

The reality is that there is very little difference, if any at all, for the animals — and in some instances it can be even worse. With organic dairy, they're not able to give the cows antibiotics or medications to clear up infections. The cows often get mastitis — which is a terrible infection of the udder, where their udders swell and there is pus and sores and it's very painful for them to be milked — and with organic dairy, they are not able to give the cow the pharmaceuticals to clear up the mastitis. They would have to take her out of production and not sell her milk, and they won't do that. So she could suffer even worse with mastitis on an organic farm than on a conventional farm.

The only humane option is to not buy the dairy at all. The only humane option is to go vegan.

There's an essay in the book that says the only thing "extreme" about veganism is its compassion. Do you think it's unreasonable to ask people to go vegan?

I don't think it's unreasonable. Being a vegan for 33 years now, I can say that it's so much easier now than it ever has been.

Sometimes people will tell vegans to "not indoctrinate." But if you look around you, what is truly bombarding people is the marketing of meat, dairy, and eggs. It's all over the place. When someone offers information about veganism, it's minuscule in comparison. And you have to look at the source. Vegans are doing it for compassion, to help animals, to create a better world. What are the reasons behind the animal agriculture industry's marketing? Money and profit. So who are you going to listen to?

Do you really think that people can make a difference for animals by changing their choices?

If you're thinking, "I'm just one person, I'm not making a difference," I want to tell you that it absolutely does make a difference, in both tangible and intangible ways. In the tangible sense, by purchasing oat milk vs. dairy milk, you are creating a demand for that alternative.

In the intangible realm, when you live your life in a compassionate way, it permeates. People see you living a compassionate vegan life and know it is possible. Being strong and courageous in your veganism, even when you are alone, makes a huge difference.

Even if you feel that what you're doing isn't making any difference, it's important that you do it. Sometimes when I did vegan presentations back in the 90s, I'd have only one or two people show up. But I'd talk to them, and I'd find out later that they went vegan from our interaction.

The animals need us to stand up for them and to speak out.

What insight do you have for people who want to go vegan, or for vegans who want to keep advocating for animals long-term?

When you look at polls about what is blocking people from going vegan, it's often lack of social support and when people feel isolated. What I think is so critical is building community and for people to know that they are not alone. Find your vegan people. We need that connection. If we don't have that support, excuses might come up.

Regarding my approach to vegan advocacy, I would never tell anyone that they have to do it "my way;" we are just making educated guesses about what is effective, but I do feel like I have some experience I can offer. I've done a wide variety of activism and where I have come to is a place of balance. I think

what's going to reach the most people is being honest about what is happening and that you as a (non-vegan) consumer are contributing to it. Not sugar coating, but using language and tone that is compassionate and kind so it is heard.

I tell stories about the animals so that people recognize that animals are sentient. It's also important that we don't compromise on the message that these animals deserve to live free of human-imposed suffering, and no "little amount" is justifiable. If even one animal is killed at human hands for food, that is one too many.

In terms of keeping activism sustainable, it's important that you do what you feel comfortable doing. Sometimes it can become too much, and we need to step back and reassess. If that happens, find another way to help. Activism is not just one thing. Animal welfare organizations need graphic designers and someone to do their taxes as much as they need direct action protests and leafleting. There are so many ways to help and the work is so rewarding.

What's next for you?

The Humane Hoax book is part of a larger campaign called the Humane Hoax Project. We just completed an online conference, and there will be another one in the fall. You can learn more about our events at HumaneHoax.org. I'm also wanting to do a picture book of images of the Humane Hoax, capturing photos of marketing, signs, and other images of animals that appear "happy" to be farmed and go to slaughter, and when people who see these images to take a high resolution picture and send it to me. I'm also continuing work on the Ahimsa Living Project, which shows how nonviolence connects to veganism. Our Ahimsa Vegan Conference is coming up in August. I'm also working on my Hope for Animals podcast, and the latest four episodes feature deep dives into the chapters of The Humane Hoax with some of the authors.

Any final thoughts?

Even though I am adamantly frustrated by the Humane Hoax, I do feel that it is a positive progression — that we are moving in the right direction. I believe people are inherently compassionate and they do care. They don't want to hurt animals. That's why these labels are selling.

The logical progression of treating animals humanely, of giving them space, not hurting them, is that we should not kill them. If you follow the logic, that is where this is going to go. We should not commodify animals. They should not be seen as objects. We should not make money off their bodies, and we should not kill them.

That's why I edited the book — to educate people so that they can be informed to make the most compassionate choice, which is to live vegan. That is what is truly humane.

The
HUMANE
HOAX



*Essays Exposing the Myth of Happy Meat,
Humane Dairy, and Ethical Eggs*

Hope Bohanec
Editor



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