

OP-ED OP-ED OPINION

# Billions of farm animals deserve a day of rest too — keep them off the grill and off your table on Labor Day

By LAURA SCHENONE AUG 31, 2018 | 4:05 AM



Cattle on a farm near Fresno. (Los Angeles Times)

The biggest workforce in America is an invisible one — more than a billion animals on farms and ranches, very often in factory conditions. This Labor Day, we should pay tribute to them, just as we do all other laborers, and give them a day of rest too: Keep them off the grill and off your table. There are obvious benefits to be had for the animals and for us by reducing our consumption of meat.

Carnivores and omnivores are now averting their eyes from this essay, written, they suspect, by a righteous vegan. But I understand the pleasures of a good hamburger. Please hear me out.

Time and again, national polls find that most Americans want farm animals to be treated humanely. Yet the majority of the animals raised for our tables lead confined, miserable lives. They suffer. They are exempt from the federal Animal Welfare Act; voluntary industry guidelines and patchwork, inadequately enforced state laws are all they have to protect them from abuse in their lives on farms.

Because the government isn't doing enough to protect these animals, consumers must. The last decade has proven that our purchasing power can change things for the better. Giant food companies such as Nestle and Perdue have agreed to give animals more room to grow, more sunlight, and more fresh air — albeit incrementally — in response to consumer pressure and undercover investigations by activists. We must continue to push them to end cruel factory farm conditions in particular. Reducing our demand will get their attention.

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If you aren't willing to give up your burger on Monday for animal welfare, what about doing it for the survival of the planet and human civilization? Eating meat contributes to greenhouse gases that are heating up the Earth and causing disastrous climate change.

This summer has provided us with strong evidence of what we have wrought. It's been a summer of fire and drought and heat waves all over the globe — including record high temperatures in the Arctic Circle. In the Pacific Northwest, an orca went on a tour of grief, swimming with her dead baby for 17 days, as though crying out to us to see that human activity — from pollution to warming waters to the decimation of the orca food source, Chinook salmon — is pushing her community of killer whales toward extinction. Did you receive these messages?

According to NASA, the Earth is now 1 degree Celsius warmer than it was at the end of the 19th century. We are almost certainly headed to a 2-degree increase, which guarantees more droughts, fires, floods and deadly hurricanes. There are those who blame President Trump for abandoning the Paris climate agreement, for his

choice of Environmental Protection Agency chief, for rolling back restrictions on coal-burning power plants, and it's true that politicians (and not just Trump) deserve our curses for their inaction. But our choices can be

toxic too.

A recent [study](#) — the most comprehensive to date — concluded that U.S. household food purchases accounted for 16% of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, and animal proteins are the main driver of carbon emissions. Individual choices make a difference. If you are affluent and educated, chances are that you eat more animal protein than the rest of the population, so your efforts to curtail meat-eating will have a greater impact.

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And no, I'm not a vegan, just veganish, a vegetarian who strives to do better but often misses the mark. As a former food writer who spent many years celebrating the glories of prosciutto, I am fully aware of the sacrifice in giving up meat. But I once found myself in a pig-birthing factory, amid row after row of hogs in horrifically small gestation crates. It changed my mind, my diet, how I spend my money.

The idea that humans have, and should have, dominion over all nature is basic in Western civilization. We find it in ancient Hebrew, Christian and Islamic texts. Aristotle provided a specific secular blueprint for such a hierarchy. A passionate student of nature, he organized the universe into the *scalae naturae* — literally the natural ladder of being. Men were at the top, followed by women, then slaves, then big beasts, then small ones, with earth and rock being at the bottom. This hierarchy persists in our laws, and in our culture; most people assume humans hold a superior rank in nature. It's a good part of what has gotten us into the dire Anthropocene era of today.

Giving animals time off our plates on Monday consciously upends the dominion of humans. It acknowledges that animals are sentient beings and much more: What we eat can save the world, and ourselves.

*Laura Schenone is the author of "The Dogs of Avalon: The Race to Save Animals in Peril" and the James Beard Award-winning book: "A Thousand Years Over a Hot Stove: A History of American Women Told Through Food, Recipes, and Remembrances."*

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