

## Is Dairy Farming Cruel to Bright and Emotional Cows?

From [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today/Animal Emotions](#)

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*Science shows it is abusive and clearly violates the Five Freedoms and decency.*

A recent essay in the *New York Times* by Andrew Jacobs called [Is Dairy Farming Cruel to Cows?](#) has generated a lot of interest because more and more people in the general public—[not only pro-animal advocates and activists](#)—are deeply concerned with the emotional well-being of so-called "food animals" and [the dire environmental and ecological effects on our planet of industrialized food in general](#). It also focused on a somewhat unique farm on upstate New York that is not at all representative of the horrific conditions in which the vast majority of dairy cows are kept. For these reasons and others, I'm pleased to offer this guest essay by [Dotsie Bausch](#), Olympic medalist and founder of [Switch4Good](#), about the current state of dairy and dairy cows who science has clearly shown to be [highly intelligent, sentient, and deeply feeling animals](#). It is an excellent follow-up to some other essays that focus on the same topics.<sup>1,2</sup>

*Here's what Dotsie had to say.*



Source: Jan Koetsier/Pexels

In a time where facts and science are regularly ignored for political pursuit—costing hundreds of thousands of Americans their lives due to COVID misinformation and [denial](#)—let's not rehash a debate that has long been settled: yes, the dairy industry is cruel. Cruel to animals, [the environment](#), and your health.

The idyllic, bucolic small farm the *New York Times* reporter championed in his article "Is Dairy Farming Cruel to Cows?" is not an accurate representation of the American dairy industry. According to the USDA, more than 50 percent of U.S. milk is now produced by just 3 percent of the country's small dairies. In fact, most modern dairies have 10 times the number of cows than the farm featured in the article. The very largest dairies have 15,000 cows or more who produced nearly all the milk consumed in the United States. The truth is that your milk comes from a factory farm where animals are treated like milk machines, not the small family farm of yesteryears with a few hundred cows.

Dairy is cruel to cows. Dozens upon dozens of undercover investigations have documented egregious abuse of dairy cows over the last decade. Take Idaho, for example, the largest dairy farm in the state was exposed when workers were found routinely beating and, in a few cases, sexually assaulting the cows at their factory farm.<sup>3</sup> The video went viral on social media, but the dairy industry's response fell short. In lieu of making meaningful reforms to improve the welfare of the animals, the industry put pressure on the Idaho state legislature to introduce an ag-gag bill aimed at criminalizing the brave workers who came forward with the video of abuse. In state after state, dairy farm after dairy farm, non-profit organizations have exposed cruelty to dairy cows as a routine part of doing business.

## Is Dairy Farming Cruel to Bright and Emotional Cows?

Page 2 of 4

Aside from the blatant abuses inflicted on dairy cows at the hands of frustrated workers (kicking, punching, dragging behind tractors), the routine and systematic cruelty over 10 million US dairy cows endure is arguably horrific. Forcibly impregnated. [Separated from her children](#). Hooked up to machines and sucked dry. All of these actions are repeated over and over and over again until she is “spent—” a dairy industry term meaning, “she’s not producing enough milk worth the cost of keeping her alive.” After five to seven years of this cycle of abuse, she is then killed and often turned into hamburger meat.

As indicated in the New York Times article, there is no avoiding the grim fate of the male calves born on a dairy farm. These babies are taken from the mother, isolated for several weeks in cramped enclosures, then killed for veal. Former 18-year dairy farm worker Jackie Norman commented, “Upon giving birth, I then played a part in inflicting the worst and cruelest suffering of all. As the mother cow stood feeding, washing and nuzzling her perfect, newborn calf, I would drive into the paddock with a quad bike and trailer, while another farm worker would scoop up the calf, just a few hours old, place it unceremoniously into the trailer and get me to drive off, with the calf bellowing loudly for its mother and the terrified and [stressed](#) mother chasing hopelessly behind, before being taken their separate ways.”

The New York Times article mentioned that it is important we don’t [anthropomorphize](#) cows.

However, [anthropomorphism is encouraged in children’s bedtime stories about animals](#), but then as adults we learn to disconnect and see ourselves as superior to every other being on earth (which many use as the rationale for hurting animals) and when you think about it, is quite conceited and egotistical given that there are 8.5 million other species with whom we share the planet.

Humans like to avoid the [guilt](#) and [cognitive dissonance](#) because they know they may be harming an animal by sloughing it off and saying animal emotions are “different” than humans and “less complex” than ours.<sup>4</sup> However, ample research has shown us time and time again that [an individual animal’s emotions and feelings are as important to them as ours are to us](#). So who are we to judge them? [We also use names and labels for different “food animals” [that serve as psychological ploys to distance people from their meals and reduce cognitive dissonance](#).]

If we are to lean into scientific data, [we need to stop denying what we know from comparative research in the field of cognitive ethology](#). And lacking [empathy](#) for beings other than ourselves is the reason we have been able to form our overproduced, virus-slinging, economic system in which animals are insentient livestock, commodities, and units of production here to serve us.

The New York Times article seemed to completely overlook all the damning evidence proving rampant animal abuse exists in the dairy industry while also completely ignoring the non-animal cruelties that deserve to be discussed. These non-animal cruelties include the negative health impacts of consuming dairy and [the toll dairy production has on the environment](#).<sup>5</sup>

Dairy is one of the largest environmental polluters on the planet. It produces millions of tons of manure, air pollutants, and wastewater that seeps into America’s drinking water, rivers, and lakes. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, a 2,000-cow dairy herd will create 240,000 pounds of manure daily. That is roughly 45,000 tons per year. The USDA estimates that manure from a dairy milking just 200 cows produces as much nitrogen as is in the sewage from a community of 5,000-10,000 people. Additionally, it takes up to 1,000 gallons of water to produce one gallon of cows’ milk, and the production of raw milk makes up 38 percent of the greenhouse gases produced by enteric emissions. The dairy industry is undeniably hastening the destruction of the planet.

Not addressed in the article are the facts surrounding the cruelty dairy has on our health.<sup>6</sup> Thirty-six percent of the US population is lactose intolerant; however, between 70 to 95 percent of Blacks, Asians, Latinx, Ashkenazi Jews, and Native Americans suffer from this common diagnosis. Within the global perspective, lactase persistence is a minority trait, as 65 percent of the human population is naturally lactose intolerant. That should be no surprise because it is unnatural for adult

## Is Dairy Farming Cruel to Bright and Emotional Cows?

Page 3 of 4

animals to consume mother's milk from another species. Individuals who cannot digest cow's milk suffer from a range of mild to severe symptoms if they consume dairy or dairy products. These symptoms include bloating, gas, stomach pain, diarrhea, and other gastrointestinal issues, and typically occur within 30 minutes to two hours of consuming dairy. There is no cure to lactose intolerance, and symptoms often increase in severity as one ages due to the decreased activity of the lactase enzyme. And yet, the US government suggests all Americans consume three cups of dairy a day.  
article continues after advertisement

Dairy is also not necessary for the other 64 percent of the US population who are not lactose intolerant. Consider the mounting evidence that has linked dairy to breast cancer, or the fact that dairy contains artery-clogging high levels of trans and saturated fats. Just this year, Harvard researchers [Walter Willet and David Ludwig](#) published a comprehensive review in the New England Journal of Medicine clearly stating that milk is not only unnecessary, but potentially harmful to human health. All dairy—even the “low-fat, no added [hormones](#)” variety so heavily recommended by the guidelines—contains 15 bovine hormones that can negatively impact one's health. Another 2020 study added to the growing body of evidence linking cow's milk with hormone-dependent cancer—women who consumed three or more servings of dairy increased their relative risk of breast cancer by upwards of 80 percent.

Americans have been told for decades that milk does a body good, but the substance does far more physical harm than good. Even for the minority of the global population that is not lactose intolerant, dairy can still cause bloating, respiratory issues, and chronic inflammation over time.

The jury is no longer out, and there is no room left for guilt-driven and other justifications. Dairy is cruel to animals, the planet, and our health. Alternatives are widely available, and it's time to give healthier and delicious non-dairy options a try. It's a winning situation all around—for our magnificent planet, other animals, and ourselves.

### References

### Notes

- 1) Dotsie Bausch is an Olympic silver medalist, activist, speaker, and nonprofit founder. After recovering from a life-threatening eating disorder, she found her love and talent for cycling, which led to a 14-year professional career concluding with a silver medal at the 2012 Olympics. She stars in the 2018 film “The Game Changers,” is featured in the Netflix documentary “Personal Gold,” and gave a TEDx Talk titled Olympic Level Compassion. She currently serves as the Executive Director of Switch4Good, a health and performance focused nonprofit that encourages all to Live Better. Do More. Dairy-Free.
  - 2) [The Effects of Food on Ecosystems and Biodiversity](#). (Science shows our meal plans are destroying our magnificent planet.); [The Scary Facts of Dairy Violate the Five Freedoms](#); ["Baby Hers": All Babies Belong With Their Mothers](#) (An interview with filmmaker Susan Rosenzweig on the hidden horrors of dairy.); [What Would a Mother "Food" Cow Tell Us About Her Children?](#); [Do Animals Think or Feel?](#) (The Ontario Federation of Agriculture says no, despite clear evidence they do.); [Why Are Cows Meat, Pigs Pork, Turkeys Turkey, and Tunas Tuna?](#)
  - 3) For more on what happened in Idaho click [here](#).
  - 4) For further discussions about cognitive dissonance see [The Psychology Behind Why We Love and Exploit Animals](#).
  - 5) Details from scientific research can be found [here](#).
  - 6) Data can be found [here](#).
- Bekoff, Marc. [The Psychology of Denying Science, Common Sense, and Reality](#).

## Is Dairy Farming Cruel to Bright and Emotional Cows?

Page 4 of 4

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