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Why did the chickens cross the road?

- Perhaps to escape while they could still see their way.-

The future of poultry may lack vision, literally. Danish researchers observing a pack of genetically blind hens discovered that the chickens were inherently less stressed and seemed to have a much higher level of well-being in confined and overcrowded conditions.

A happy chicken roams free. A happy chicken does NOT like to be pecked at by other chickens. Common sense and simple logic tell us this. Unfortunately, chickens are bullies, and in an overcrowded free range pen, they are unprotected from their self-imposed pecking order. Breeding blind hens is a solution to this problem that does not include decreasing hen density (therefore decreasing the productivity). In a pen of blind hens the bullying is virtually eliminated. This increased well-being not only applies to free range, but also to caged hens as well. The less they can see, the better off they seem to be.

Researchers have taken the possibility seriously enough to project that blind hens, less disturbed by their overcrowded conditions, would require 25 percent less feed and lay 30 percent more eggs. Tyson and Perdue could reap huge additional profits; but what about the integrity of the chicken? Is this an ethical means of increasing productivity?

Anthropomorphism may be responsible for objections one may have to genetically induce blindness in a flock of free range layers. One imagines their own psychic pain of being born blind; projecting these feelings onto the birds, but who's to say the chickens even know what they're missing? This seems like an easy solution to an important animal welfare issue. Just use blind hens! They'll be better off, right? Very quickly the ethical implication of breeding "blind hens" crosses into the philosophical realm.

Integrity, by definition, is word that is often used to indicate an adherence to a moral or ethical code. When applying this word to an animal, Integrity points out that an animal is capable of carrying a proper conception of self (Oxford, 2005). To say that it is right to maintain the integrity of an animal, or its species indicates that an animal's life has the ability of losing its unity, or being violated in some way. Simply put... birds should, fly, dogs should sniff, cows should eat grass and moo all day, and all of these animals should be able to see. It is

accepted by the AVMA that any interference with this “naturalness,” disrupting that animal’s integrity, should therefore be avoided.

The AVMA recognizes that confinement livestock and poultry production is well established, and is humane as long as it is set up in a way that enables most normal behaviors. The organization also advises that this process should be designed in a way that reduces flock/herd aggression. This policy is a paradox to the issue at hand. Surely free range birds have the most ability to exhibit “normal behaviors,” however when not confined, the pecking and aggressive behaviors of the birds increases drastically. “Blind hens” can be seen as a solution to this paradox. That is, if you can omit vision from the repertoire of normal chicken behaviors. Should the animal’s integrity or its welfare be maintained? Both are advocated, but maintaining one compromises the other. As one can see, there are no clear cut answers.

Even if excluding the possibility of a hen experiencing “psychic pain,” one may bring up more practical and quantitative concerns. Will a blind flock of hens experience the same health and longevity? Will they be just as productive? Will inducing blindness simultaneously genetically alter other processes that may compromise the quality of the flock? What about generations down the line? More research and observation is required to answer these questions, however this time may be better spent investigating superior housing methods that can be used to produce unaltered and happy, “seeing” hens.

Either way, the idea of changing the hen and not the henhouse may just be a short term solution for a more encompassing problem.

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