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Are we now living in the Meatropocene, not the Anthropocene?

The world is awash with meat, so much so that we produce 370 million tonnes globally of animal flesh per year. Humans have fundamentally reshaped our planet to the point that, in 2020, we reached a threshold where the anthropogenic mass, including us and all the things we have built, surpassed that of the natural world. Sadly, as a result of human flourishing, wild animals now represent just 4% of the Earth's biomass, with humans making up 34% and livestock the remaining 62%. Cows easily make up the largest mass, numbering around 4.5 billion, but chickens outnumber humans around 3 to one. Once again, why should anyone care? World Animal Day was observed on October 4th. There was no fanfare, little media attention, and according to Google Trends, interest had waned to zero two days later. So what? Why should the average person care, given that multiple global conflicts affect vast swathes of humanity, when, in the scheme of things, animals are of little significance?

Herein lies the paradox. Most of us profess a love for pets, or animals of some form or another. We spend vast amounts feeding and grooming them, and unfortunately, often on vet bills. But why is it we distance ourselves from the animals we know simply as 'livestock'. With the rhetoric around fossil fuel emissions and renewable energy reaching a fever pitch, why has the elephant in the room not been addressed, that global livestock production, mostly cattle, accounts for [12% of global greenhouse emissions](#).

The short answer is that we enjoy eating meat and have likely evolved larger brains as a result; however, the long answer is much more nuanced. Self-interested, global multinational factory farming operations have fundamentally changed the farming landscape, from intergenerational, family-run farming practices to something much more pernicious. Slick marketing campaigns, fast food and massive government subsidies support a growing industry that is not just damaging our health, but also the environment and inflicting untold misery on billions of factory-farmed animals. China is one of the world's largest pig producers, growing around 430 million pigs each year, which also produces around 7 billion tons of pig poop, which often ends up in rivers and waterways. In 2024, two high-rise 'hog hotels' were constructed in [Hubei province, China](#). The two 26-storey skyscrapers employ an army of 800 workers and produce around 1.2 million pigs per year. The pigs are transported to their designated floor via elevator according to their age, beginning in the gestation area, then to the farrowing area, followed by the nursery, and finally the raising area, where they spend 6-8 months before being shipped off to their forever home, as pork sausages.

This is one of many stories where human ingenuity has been tasked with breeding larger, tastier animals more efficiently and cost-effectively. But at what cost? Certainly, we enjoy our bacon, love indulging in a juicy burger or take home that convenient 'bachelor's handbag' for a quick and convenient dinner, but often distance ourselves from considering the animal that provided that meal.

This and more are the subject of Gehlert's polarising book "Oh My Goat": Just how intelligent are the animals we eat? Through a lens of human and comparative psychology, the author invites us to examine our beliefs, intentions, and predilections towards animals and their consumption. Gehlert, who lives on several acres in Queensland's Sunshine Coast with a menagerie of animals, has led a rather unconventional life. Spending over a decade in the outback, he is no stranger to farming practices, shooting and hunting. "Our spoiled goats are my karma!" Quips the artist turned psychology student, referring to the many times the hunter turned activist has shot feral goats. Feral goats have indeed reached plague proportions in parts of Australia, partly due to poor farming practices and a recent collapse in the meat processing of the goats. Oddly, goats were the genesis of the book, the introduction outlining how one of the author's goats broke her leg,

leading to substantial vet bills and the burning question, why do we lavish attention on some animals, yet kill and eat others?

A rather uncomfortable read is fortified with humour and fascinating side journeys into some strange and interesting aspects of how humans and animals have interacted across time. Drawing on recent research and the writings of many prominent scientists and animal behaviourists, the book challenges the reader with the ultimate question: Should we eat less meat?

Oh My Goat is available now through Amazon or most book retailers.

About the Author:

Shane Gehlert is an artist, photographer, and filmmaker who found his passion for academia later in life by pursuing a degree in psychology. His love for travel and a deep fascination with animals have taken him all over the world, where he enjoys observing and photographing the incredible creatures with which we share this planet. Shane lives in Queensland, Australia, with his wife, Cristine, and a menagerie of rather spoilt animals.

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