

# **Animal Welfare, Societal Concerns and Implications for the Florida Dairy Industry**

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Some time ago I received an article entitled “*A Mythological/Historical Consideration of the Human-Animal Relationship*” written by Ronald Keith Salmon. It was sent to me by Dr. Tim Blackwell, Lead Veterinarian for Veterinary Science and Policy with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food (OMAF) in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. It just so happened that I received it during the time that I was preparing my comments and paper for this conference. After several starts and restarts, I finally came to the simple conclusion that the message I really wanted to share was captured within the context of the Northwest Coast Indian Legend from Salmon’s article. Therefore, I share with you the Legend and my interpretation of its meaning and implications to the Florida Dairy Industry.

## **The Indian Legend of the Man Who Killed too Many**

*There was once hunter whose skill was beyond all other hunters. Day after day he hunted...and he killed and he killed and he killed. Never was his family or his People hungry. But his People became fearful that he would kill all of the animals. So, they abandoned him. When the hunter found his People gone, he was hurt and confused: how could they abandon the one who fed them? The pain he felt was so great that he began to die – he fell into a trance where he dreamed that he was being hunted and consumed by the sea lions which he himself had once hunted. After he had been consumed by the sea lions, he suddenly awoke from the trance and began to search for his People, who were by then very hungry. When the hunter saw their hunger, he began to sing praises to all of the animals who had ever fed his People and to all of those who would soon feed his People again. Then he began once more to do that which he was born to do: he began to hunt, his heart carrying the memory of what it felt like to be hunted and consumed.*

## **From RK Salmon; A Mythological/Historical Consideration of the Human-Animal Relationship**

How well this story parallels similar struggles we encounter in our attempts to understand the differing views of society and agriculture with respect to the human-animal relationship. In today’s culture the hunter symbolizes agriculture and his People symbolize society. Just as the hunter possessed skills that surpassed all others and his People benefited as a result; so it is today that our productivity in American agriculture is unmatched and our culture knows nothing of famine; let alone a shortage of food. Yet, while the hunter’s People were never hungry, eventually they began to question the hunter’s motivations. When the grocery shelves are full concerns about food shift to quality, safety, price, and the welfare of the animals from which the food is produced.

Through abandonment by his People and his subsequent dream, the hunter was forced to acknowledge and reconsider his unconscious treatment of animals. He was able to see that his People were willing to go hungry rather than risk the continued unrestrained and unconscious killing of animals. One might compare this to California's Proposition 2 (the Prevention of Farm Animal Cruelty Act) where the state's voters chose in favor of the Proposition's prohibition of confinement housing in a manner that does not allow animals to turn around freely, lie down, stand up, and fully extend their limbs. The Act which passed by a wide margin of 63% of the votes in favor and 37% against was specifically intended to address concerns with three types of confinement systems: veal crates, battery cages, and sow gestation crates.

Veal calf housing results in highly restricted movement of calves. That alone was sufficient to precipitate a strong animal welfare movement against veal in the 1980s with the release of photographs of veal calves tethered in crates where they could barely move. Veal industries sales plummeted as a result and never recovered. Battery cage housing is designed for up to 10 hens/cage in a 2.33 ft<sup>2</sup> area. Considering a wingspan of 30-32 inches for each bird that leaves an area smaller than the size of an 8.5 X 11 sheet of paper per hen. And finally, gestation crates for housing sows. Gestation crates are metal enclosures used to house female breeding sows during pregnancy; in effect for most of their adult life. The enclosures measure 6.6 ft x 2.0 ft (2 m x 60 cm) and house sows that weigh up to 600 lbs (270 kg). Despite the livestock industry's protests and claims that these types of housing were acceptable, the voters of California voted to prohibit such housing. It's not a performance issue nor is it a scientific matter in the minds of consumers; but an ethical one; consumers want assurance that animals are being treated properly. And so it was for the hunter's People, what they viewed as killing without concern for the animals was simply unacceptable, regardless of the fact that they were well fed.

Indeed, not until the hunter was able to experience (if only in a dream) what it was like to be hunted and consumed by the sea lions could he begin to understand what it was like to be prey versus predator; to be hunted and killed without respect or praise for the life that was sacrificed. The hunter awoke from his dream with an enlightened sense of respect for the animals he hunted and for their sacrifice to feed his People. He immediately searched for his people. When he found them they were hungry, so he turned his attention to that which he was born to do; hunt animals to feed his People. But this time, with a new respect for the animals he hunted and a better perspective for the concerns of his People. He learned that the hunting and killing of animals should not be approached carelessly; rather with purpose, praise and thanksgiving for their sacrifice.

This is the essence of what society wants of animal agriculture. They want to know that those of us involved in animal agriculture are not solely concerned about our own financial welfare, rather the welfare of our animals is a priority in everything we do. But beyond that, as the story tells us; people want to know that we are able to praise the life of animals for the gifts of food, fiber and power they provide for man. It's the point made by Albert Schweitzer in saying ...

*"To the man who is truly ethical all life is sacred, including that which from the human point of view seems lower. Man makes distinctions...under the pressure of necessity, as for example, when it falls to him to decide which of two lives he must*

*sacrifice in order to preserve the other. But through it all he knows that he bears the responsibility for the life that is sacrificed."*

It is the point of Dr. Temple Grandin's practice of kneeling in reverence upon entrance to a slaughter house and also the point of the Native American Indian tribes that danced around the camp fire in celebration and thanksgiving after a successful hunt.

## **Society, Farming and Food Production**

We are tempted to assume that a full belly equates to blind acceptance of anything we want to do in agriculture - it doesn't. Just as the hunter was hurt and confused at the disappearance of his People, so are today's farmers and ranchers shocked by what seems an unappreciative consumer. Despite access to the world's most safe, wholesome and abundant food supply and paying less than 10-12% of their disposable income on food, Americans are still comfortable to complain about its price. Few seem to be cognizant of the fact that they don't pay the real price; rather the artificially reduced price thanks to subsidies from a government committed to a policy of low cost food for its people.

The combination of inexpensive food and a seemingly inexhaustible supply gives people little concern for how much they waste. According to Jonathan Bloom, Americans waste enough food each day to fill a 90,000 seat football stadium to the brim. This equates to a half pound of food wasted per day per person. The obvious question is why or how is that we have become so wasteful? Bloom suggests that today's generation has lived through much easier times compared to those who lived in the post war eras of World Wars I and II and the Great Depression. But, there's another factor involved, and that is Americans have gradually separated themselves from the food they grow. They know little about farming and food production in modern agriculture and certainly less about the volatility and uncertainties with which farmers must cope to make a living (J Benson, Natural News, October 17, 2011).

The hunter's People were concerned that he would kill all the animals, so they abandoned him. Similarities observed in our culture are distrust of the agri-business approach of an industrialized high tech agriculture. People simply don't understand genetic engineering or trust that the food produced as a result is safe. Moreover, consumers assume that the agri-business approach in agriculture reduces the value of animals to mere machines – the so-called factory farming concept – viewed as an open door to animal exploitation and abuse.

## **Implications for the Florida Dairy Industry**

The story tells us that we need to understand the differing views of society and agriculture with respect to the human-animal relationship. It also suggests that while most people are appreciative of an abundant food supply, they want assurance that animals are being treated properly. We can and are doing this through efforts such as the NMPF FARM Program, the Southeast Milk Animal Husbandry Audit and other similar programs. But, more importantly, those of us involved in agriculture need to embrace our sacred heritage as the providers of food and fiber for mankind; and in the process, incorporate the dignity and respect for animals they deserve. As in the "*Legend of The Man Who Killed too Many*", it wasn't until the hunter learned

to honor the animals for their sacrifice that he earned the right to do it and also the respect of his people.

## NOTES

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