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FOIE GRAS :
THE FORCE FEEDING OF DUCKS AND GEESE

B R I E F I N G

'Foie gras' means fat liver. It is either served with a variety of sauces or as a pâté.

To produce foie gras, a 20-30 cm. long pipe is thrust down the throats of ducks and geese. Ducks are force-fed twice a day for 12-15 days, geese three times a day for 15-21 days. Usually the feed is boiled maize mixed with fat and salt. By the end of the force feeding period, the birds' livers have swollen to between 6 and 10 times their normal size. Today most foie gras comes from ducks who, during the force feeding period, are often kept in tiny cages.

16,800 tonnes of foie gras were produced worldwide in 1998. Almost 80% of world foie gras production comes from France, with Hungary, Bulgaria and Spain also being large producers. Foie gras production is growing rapidly; France's output has doubled since 1990.

The laws of Denmark, Germany, Norway and Poland specifically prohibit force feeding. In the UK and Switzerland general animal protection legislation is interpreted as prohibiting force feeding.

Damage to the liver

As indicated earlier, during force feeding the liver swells to 6-10 times its normal size. Force feeding causes a fatty degeneration in the liver cells. In its 1998 report the EU's Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (SCAHAW) observed: "The most obvious change [in the liver] is the increase in the number of large fat globules visible in the cells". The Committee concluded that normal liver structure and function is "severely altered and compromised".

Feeding too great a quantity of food leads to diseases such as fibrosis, liver haemorrhages and jaundice. The SCAHAW pointed out that if birds are force fed for longer than the normal commercial period "mortality can be very high, largely as a consequence of failure of liver function". In other words, the birds are being fed a quantity of food which, if they were not slaughtered, would almost certainly kill them. Indeed, 10-20 times more birds die during the force feeding period than would do naturally; the mortality rate in force fed birds varies from 2% to 4% in the two-week force feeding period compared with around 0.2% in non-force fed ducks.

The increase in liver size from forced feeding is so great that the abdomen expands. This makes walking and breathing difficult. The SCAHAW noted that "birds with expanded livers had difficulty in standing and their natural gait and ability to walk were severely impaired".

The SCAHAW pointed out that "the large amount of food which is rapidly intubated during the force feeding procedure leads to immediate oesophageal distension, increased heat production and panting".

Injuries caused by the mechanism of forced feeding

Force feeding is carried out by the use of a funnel fitted with a long tube which is thrust down the bird's throat. To pump the food into the bird, an auger is generally used. This is moved either by hand in traditional units or with an electric motor. Such systems are used for 30% of the birds and take 45-60 seconds to deliver the food. In larger units pneumatic devices are used, which take just 2-3 seconds.

The SCAHAW concluded that the problems of the force feeding procedure itself include:

- 1) handling by humans which can cause aversion and discomfort for the birds, and
- 2) the potentially damaging and distressing effects of the insertion of the tube into the oesophagus. This can result in accumulated scar tissue in, and serious injury to, the oesophagus of ducks.

In particular, insertion of the pipe can result in inflammation of the bird's neck, and bruising and even perforation of the oesophagus. Moreover, asphyxia can be caused by food accidentally being forced into the trachea.

Housing in cages

During the force feeding period many ducks are kept in small individual cages which are so tiny that birds cannot stand erect, turn round or flap their wings. Ducks and geese are social birds; their social behaviour is frustrated by being confined in individual cages.

During the force feeding period, the birds are sometimes kept in near darkness which, concluded the SCAHAW, "prevents normal investigatory behaviour, tends to prevent normal exercise and results in poor welfare". Moreover, ducks and geese require water for preening and have a preference to swim, behaviours which are denied by the cage.

The SCAHAW notes that a high percentage of ducks kept in individual cages during the force feeding period have lesions of the sternum and bone fractures at the abattoir.

Scientific Committee's conclusions

The SCAHAW concluded that force feeding, as currently practised, "is detrimental to the welfare of the birds". They recommended that:

?? No process should be used that results in an increase in liver size such that its function is significantly modified or that it causes increased mortality, pain or distress.

?? No feeding procedure should be used that results in substantial discomfort.

Foie gras production breaches both these recommendations.

The SCAHAW also recommended that the use of small individual cages should not be permitted.

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