BRIEFING:
THE GAME BIRD SHOOTING INDUSTRY

CAMPAIGN AIM

A BAN ON THE USE OF BATTERY CAGES FOR PHEASANT AND PARTRIDGE PRODUCTION

THE BREEDING CAGES

Game bird production typically involves the use of metal battery cages for birds used for egg production, as well as industrial hatcheries, sheds (which can each hold as many as 10,000 birds) and large release pens for their offspring.

Each pheasant breeding cage holds one male and between eight and ten females. The units are fitted with a wire mesh sloping floor so that the eggs can roll through for easy collection. The roof is usually made from flexible wire netting. The cages are exposed to the elements and the birds have little respite from the wind, rain, cold and burning sun. Our undercover investigators have recorded temperatures as high as 41C in summer and -4C in winter inside the cages.

Partridges are confined in breeding pairs in enclosed metal boxes that are smaller and just as bleak as the pheasant units.

Animal Aid's undercover team has filmed cages holding pheasants and partridges used for breeding purposes that breach the official Welfare Code, because they are utterly barren.

Stress, Feather Loss, Wounds

Our undercover evidence demonstrates that the caged birds suffer a high incidence of stress, as well as feather loss, and back and head wounds from stress-induced aggression. Many of the pheasants lunge repeatedly at their cage roofs in a futile attempt to escape, damaging their heads in the process.

Fitted with Restraining Devices

In an effort to eliminate the aggression between the birds caused by the crowded conditions in the breeding cages (as well as in the rearing sheds and release pens), game farmers fit restraining devices ('bits') over the birds' beaks to prevent them from pecking their cage-mates.

The £420,000 Defra Study

In 2010, Defra Minister, Jim Paice, withdrew an Animal Welfare Act (AWA) Code of Practice for game bird production that had been introduced in the final days of the Labour government and which would have outlawed battery cages for breeding pheasants. He replaced it with one that allowed the cages to stay – albeit in a so-called 'enriched' form. This generally means that the birds have a plastic curtain set towards the back of the cage for 'privacy' and a block of wood or a piece of dowel suspended on two bricks for perching. In reality, these 'improvements' make little difference to the bleak prisons and the distress of the caged birds. And there is little evidence that game farms are made to abide by the rules.

In 2009, Defra initiated a major study, costing more than £420,000, into ***whether*** the cages could meet the welfare needs of game birds used for breeding. Astonishingly, the report was not published until July 2015 and, instead of looking at ***whether*** cages could be justified, or comparing the lives of caged birds with their wild counterparts, the study compared cages of different sizes and with different kinds of 'enrichments'.

72 pheasant and 48 partridge units were configured in different ways to test what would best suit the birds. The 'enrichments' were determined by a group of stakeholders, most of whom were from representative bodies of the game farming and shooting industries.

It was found that enriched cages offered little welfare improvements compared to cages that were barren. But this was to be expected because, as Animal Aid has long argued, and as even one of the study's stakeholders, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) also stated, it is the cages themselves that are the problem. In December 2010, BASC had called for an outright ban on the units because '*… the available space in such cages is so limited, that the welfare of the birds is seriously compromised and … the system does not conform, whether enriched or not, to the five freedoms which are the basis of the UK's welfare law*'.

The Defra study also omitted certain vital data such as the number of birds who died during the study or an assessment of the impact of 'thermal stress' on birds confined to cages that are exposed to all-year-round weather.

The study did, however, offer some telling data on what a short period of confinement in the units does to birds. Feather damage caused by pecking was identified as the main cause of early mortality. 91% of partridges and 84% of pheasants were free of such injury at the start but by the end, 39% of partridges and 69% of pheasants had suffered injuries.

PUBLIC OPPOSITION TO CAGES

A June 2018 YouGov poll of over 2000 people across Great Britain on behalf of Animal Aid and the League Against Cruel Sports, revealed that 80% oppose the use of cages to confine breeding birds (only 11% disagreed). The poll also found that 69% of people think that shooting birds for sport should be illegal (only 18% thought it should be legal, and 13% did not have an opinion on the issue).

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BACKGROUND ON THE INDUSTRY

Scale of production and costs

Around 50 million birds are bred for shooting each year (the vast majority are pheasants); around one in three are shot and only a fraction (about 3 million) go into the food chain.[i, ii, iii]

Economic studies show that it costs more than £30 to produce each bird shot, but that the cost of each carcass is around £4 retail - evidence that the birds are bred for 'sport', not food.[iv]

Feathered targets

A few weeks before the start of the partridge and pheasant shooting seasons (they run from 1 September for partridges and 1 October for pheasants, to 1 February), the birds are released, thereby causing problems for native wildlife, who must compete with them for food and cover.

Having been farm-reared, the game birds are ill-suited for life in the wild. Around two-thirds die before they can be shot. Many will starve, be run over, or succumb to predators.[v]

On shoot days, surviving birds are 'beaten' up into the sky to serve as feathered targets. Shooters can pay thousands of pounds per person a day to kill up to 800 birds.[vi]

Slaughter of wildlife

Large numbers of pheasants and partridges inevitably attract – and, in fact, boost the populations of – predator species such as stoats, weasels, foxes and members of the crow family. Gamekeepers kill them with guns, traps and snares. Non-target animals, such as dogs, cats and sheep, are also inadvertently killed. But protected birds of prey, including owls and kestrels, are deliberately killed by some gamekeepers. Certain species, including ground-nesting birds, do not impact on game bird production and are, therefore, not persecuted by gamekeepers. Since their natural predators are killed, these untargeted animals flourish. This allows the shooting industry to promote its slaughter of wildlife as a vital conservation effort.

Another of 'game' shooting's vices is the discharging of tonnes of toxic lead shot into the environment every year, where it is ingested by swans, ducks, geese and other birds.

Economics

A 2014 report by Public and Corporate Economic Consultants (PACEC), which was commissioned by a number of pro-shooting organisations, claimed that shooting is worth £2 billion to the UK economy. However, economic experts from Sheffield University and Cormack Economics, commissioned by the League Against Cruel Sports, reanalysed the data according to 'standard Treasury Green Book Guidance' and concluded that shooting is valued at between £267 million and £746 million. The Sheffield economists stated that the PACEC reports had many shortcomings, such as failing to follow Office for National Statistics Guidelines, combining data on shooting live 'quarry' and clay shooting and a failure to discuss subsidies given to the shooting sector.

TIME FOR A BAN

In the Netherlands, the production of birds for 'sport shooting' was first curbed in 1986 and outlawed entirely in 2002. The action was taken largely because of concerns about potential damage to the environment caused by large releases of pheasants. Animal Aid is calling for a similar ban to be introduced in Britain. As a matter of urgency, we are calling for the outlawing of battery cages.

www.bangamebirdcages.org.uk

References

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