

Pigs Behind Bars: Viva! pig fact sheet

(updated July 2014)

Pigs once lived wild in Britain and are said to be more intelligent than dogs, even capable of playing special computer games. Wild pigs live in small family groups and spend much of their lives rooting in the soil, yet the vast majority of British pigs raised for meat are denied even that. Most sows are routinely caged and their offspring mutilated without anaesthetic and kept indoors on intensive units – from the ramshackle to the gigantic – with almost all of their natural instincts thwarted. Viva! has filmed inside dozens of Britain's pig slums ...



The British pig industry

There are around 4.9 million pigs alive in Britain at any one time. Of those most are factory farmed. Only a quarter of sows give birth outside. Their piglets will stay with their mothers until weaning, but even for those born outdoors only around 1 per cent of pigs killed for meat spend their whole lives outside as most are moved into indoor units after weaning according to the British pig industry itself. Although some farms allow straw or other manipulable materials for pigs, many are condemned to barren hovels with just footballs or chains hanging from the ceiling as pitiful 'environmental enrichment'. Organic pig farming is in decline in Britain, with a population of 35,000 at any one time in 2013 compared to 71,000 in 2008.

The British pig industry is an insatiable consumer of soya. Around three-quarters of total soya grown goes into producing protein-rich animal feed for livestock. Soya is also used to bulk out processed meat products.

Mothers in crates

In the wild, sows build nests from twigs and leaves and can walk many kilometres to find a suitable site. Yet these nesting and rooting instincts are denied on factory farms. Every aspect of a sow's life is managed. She will be made pregnant either by being put with a boar or via artificial insemination. During most of her pregnancy she will be loose housed with other sows before being caged in the farrowing crate.

The farrowing crate is used for around 70 per cent of all British sows. It is a small metal cage in which pregnant sows are imprisoned for weeks on end, usually from a week before giving birth until her piglets are weaned. She will be subjected to this roughly twice a year. The metal frame of the crate is just centimetres bigger than the sow's body and severely restricts her movements. She is completely unable to turn around, can scarcely take a step forward or backward and frequently rubs against the bars when standing up and lying down.

The farrowing crate is sometimes confused with the sow stall or gestation crate (a similar contraption where a sow is kept during pregnancy). The sow stall has been banned in Britain since 1999, but the farrowing crate is still very much in use. Despite the British pig industry routinely suggesting that British welfare standards are the best in the world, other comparable countries have already banned or limited the use of farrowing crates including Sweden and Switzerland.

This highly unnatural environment can lead to stereotypic behaviours that indicate prolonged stress and even descent into madness, such as bar biting and vacuum chewing. The industry defends the crate by saying that it protects piglets from being crushed (a rare occurrence in the wild). However, overall piglet mortality is roughly the same on outdoor units. The farrowing crate is more about protecting profits than piglets.

A sow's life will be cut short at a relatively young age. On average, between 40-50 per cent of sows are replaced each year after producing around six litters. They are sent to the slaughterhouse for low grade meat products. Boars used for breeding are normally killed after 2 to 3 years because of their large size and because of the industry's constant pursuit of "genetic improvement".

Torn away

A sow will give birth typically to between 8 and 16 piglets. The natural weaning age for pigs is between 12 and 15 weeks, but on British farms piglets are weaned artificially early at just 3-4 weeks old. This abrupt weaning is often more than piglets' immature digestive systems can cope with and can lead to scours – diarrhoea – and failure to thrive. As a result, piglets require medication and, in intensive conditions, end up on a daily regime of drugs. Weaning in this abrupt manner is also, clearly, a psychological trauma to both mother and piglets. On modern farms, around 18 per cent of piglets do not survive until weaning.

Mutilating babies

Ironically, as with most types of factory farming, mutilations are used to try and control abnormal behaviours directly caused by the intensive farming methods themselves. British piglets suffer two types of mutilations: teeth clipping and tail docking. Viva! has filmed both undercover. Despite the Government saying that these mutilations should not be carried out routinely the industry itself admits that around 80 per cent of British piglets are mutilated each year. Teeth clipping is done to prevent damage to the teats of sows that cannot avoid the attention of their piglets because they are incarcerated in farrowing crates. It can lead to teeth/gum damage, with chronic pain and risk of infection. Tail docking (cutting off part of the tail) is done to try and prevent pigs savaging each other and causes stress and intense transient or even long-lasting pain. This behaviour is directly linked to boredom, frustration and lack of environmental enrichment. Aggression of this type is rare amongst wild pigs. As long as mutilations are done before seven weeks of age (as almost all are) no anaesthetic is used. Other countries in Europe have already banned piglet mutilations (Sweden, for instance, already prevents tail docking) – or have commitments to do so in the future.

Slaughter

In 2013, 9,790,000 pigs were slaughtered in British abattoirs. Although pigs can live to around 15 years of age, most pigs killed for meat will be killed as soon as they hit adult weight – at just five or six months old.

Pig meat consumption in Britain is falling fast

The average British meat-eater consumes around 18 pigs in a lifetime. Worldwide pig meat makes up around 40 per cent of all meat consumed (in Britain it is about 29 per cent). From June 1 2014, a relaxing in the monitoring of diseased meat will mean that tens of thousands of abscesses and lesions previously cut out will enter the human food chain. The consumption of red meat is linked to a whole range of chronic ailments – from heart disease to cancer. Despite an annual increase in the numbers of pigs slaughtered in Britain each year, consumption of pig meat continues to fall significantly each year. This anomaly is explained because, as a nation, we are exporting more and importing less according to the latest Government figures. Comparing figures from 2007 and 2013, consumption is down by over 11 per cent (145,000 tonnes).

If you want to improve your health and save animals the answer is easy. Go vegan – or at least take steps in that direction. Try Viva!'s 30 Day Vegan for FREE: www.viva.org.uk/30dayvegan.

For a referenced version of this factsheet and for information on how you can get involved in the campaign to help end the suffering of Britain's pigs visit www.piggles.org.uk or phone 0117 944 1000.

