



Our Hen House
CHANGE THE WORLD FOR ANIMALS
a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization

Interview with Jessika Ava

By OUR HEN HOUSE

Published March 1, 2014

*Following is a transcript of an interview with **JESSIKA AVA** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 216.*

JASMIN: Our friends over at Brighter Green just produced a new policy paper, “Beyond the Pail: Charting the Rapid Expansion of Dairy CAFOs in Asia,” including in countries of East Asia that have just never had a tradition of drinking milk and have widespread lactose intolerance. This particular paper was written by activist Jessika Ava, and we’re really excited to have her on today to discuss it with us.

Jessika Ava has been working for animal rights in various capacities for over 10 years. Her work has ranged from elephant conservation and primate behavior to food policy and vegan advocacy. She received a Bachelor of Science in biology, Master’s of public administration, and in the fall will begin her PhD in biostatistics. She’s on the board of directors of Out to Pasture Farm Sanctuary, Help Animals India, and Street Dog Care. Later this week, Jessika will be relocating to Kathmandu to help the city’s street dogs. Here in the States, she shares her Portland, Oregon home with a much-loved three-and-a-half-legged street dog from Nepal.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Jessika.

JESSIKA: Hi! Thank you for having me

JASMIN: Really great to have you. You’re working on such interesting things and we’re eager to have the opportunity to talk to you about them today. We understand that you recently produced a paper, which is being published by Brighter Green. We’re big fans of Brighter Green and of Mia MacDonald, who has been on the podcast before. And your paper is on dairy in Asia. Can you tell us briefly what motivated you to study this topic?

JESSIKA: Okay. So, Asia has now become the world’s top consumption of dairy, the top dairy-consuming region. And it consumes approximately 40% of the world’s supply of dairy. And at this point there hasn’t been very much documentation regarding the consequences of dairy factory farm systems, especially within that region, so there hasn’t been much documentation as far as the environmental concerns and of course the animal welfare concerns and the public health and livelihoods and what have you, unlike the meat industry, which there has been a great deal of documentation regarding globalization and increased consumption of meat. Not much has been done with dairy. So, basically, we just wanted to produce this paper to make the impacts of industrial dairy known to the public. And also at

this point in time many of these dairy CAFO operations are just starting to be produced or are in the planning stages, so now is a good opportunity to bring this paper out because we do have opportunity to potentially halt the production of those systems.

MARIANN: I have to say this just takes me by surprise, and it just seems impossible 'cause East Asia and Southeast Asia, as far as I know and most people know, there's no dairy in that cuisine and they don't have a tradition of dairy consumption. So, how did this happen?

JESSIKA: Yes, this is true. In fact, the majority of people within Asia are actually lactose intolerant, so they can't digest dairy. It makes them sick. So, there has been a strong push by the corporate industry to begin these industrial dairy operations into Southeast Asia basically because they aren't traditionally consumers, so that's a huge untapped market for the industries. And many of western countries such as the United States, our markets are basically at what is called saturation, so we are almost at our peak dairy consumption, so there's no room for the industry to go. So, that's why they're looking to these other Asian regions to start producing their dairy CAFOs.

MARIANN: What do people do who are consuming dairy who are lactose intolerant? How do they manage that?

JESSIKA: That's a good question, and there aren't very good answers to that question actually. I looked for that answer, and I've yet to find it.

JASMIN: Could you give us an idea of the size of the CAFO facilities in Vietnam and Cambodia and the conditions for the cows and calves?

JESSIKA: Yes, that's a good question. So, Vietnam and Cambodia kind of give an example of the wide range of sizes of CAFOs. Vietnam, they're in the process of producing a CAFO that by the end of the production in 2017 will actually house up to 140,000 animals.

MARIANN: Oh my God.

JESSIKA: Yeah, and this is in one facility. And it will reportedly be the largest dairy CAFO in the world. And Cambodia, on the other hand, as far as we can tell has only one CAFO at this point, and when it is completed it will house 1000 animals, which is relatively small compared to other CAFOs but it's still a very large number of animals.

MARIANN: The conditions for the cows and the calves, is it very similar to industrial dairy production in the United States?

JESSIKA: Yes. As far as the actual CAFOs themselves, yeah, the conditions are gonna be very similar to the United States. But another thing to note is that many of these countries, the vast majority of these countries, they don't have any type of animal welfare regulations at all, nor do they have any types of environmental regulations either. So, there's a chance that maybe the conditions could be worse; we don't know. But for the large part it seems that the conditions will be basically the same as in the US.

MARIANN: Oh. It's all so horrifying. So, you mentioned the lactose intolerance and you mentioned that there doesn't seem to be any evidence that anybody's addressing it. So, how are they selling this milk? How are they marketing this milk to people who really shouldn't be consuming it?

JESSIKA: Yes, that's a good question. There are very aggressive advertising campaigns going on with the industry right now. And also the corporate dairy industry has a large influence in the national nutritional guidelines, so basically the equivalency of our Food Pyramid or My Plate system. And they also have very strong influence on public school milk programs. So, they're going into the schools, they're handing out free milk, and they're basically teaching the students that milk is a requirement for proper growth and development and proper nutrition and you have to drink it for your entire life. So essentially they're creating lifelong consumers.

MARIANN: That's kind of what they did to us, only it's just even worse.

JESSIKA: Yes. In a way it is.

JASMIN: Exactly. Unlike East and Southeast Asia, India has a long tradition of dairy consumption. Why is dairy a problem in India? We all know that there's this special reverence for cows in Hinduism and that cows roam the streets, but we also hear of factory farms and horrible abuses. What's going on? What's the real story?

JESSIKA: Yeah. So, India is actually the largest milk-producing country in the world, and very few people realize that. And traditionally, yes, cows are considered a deity within its culture, but with globalization and more westernization of the country, this reverence is beginning to be more of an image than an actual practice. And right now, cows, they're typically kept by either one local farmer who might have one or two cows for just his family, or these small farms, which will hold maybe 10-20 cows.

And these small farms, they have many documented cases of extremely cruel practices. And just as one example is the use of oxytocin, which is an illegal drug but it's still used on a regular basis. And it's given to these cows, and it actually mimics labor pains and uterine contractions. So, basically the cow feels like she's in labor and that causes her to produce more milk. And these practices, like I said, they're illegal, but they are still used.

And then whenever the cows no longer produce milk or a male calf is born, just like the US, they aren't needed, so they are often abandoned to the streets. And many of the images that you see of India, that stereotypical image of the wandering cow, a lot of these cows, some of them are quote-unquote "owned" and "cared for," but many of them are just abandoned cows who are no longer needed and are now just left to fend for themselves on the streets. And then what happens is that these cows are rounded up, sometimes legally, sometimes illegally, and they are transported under very horrific conditions to slaughterhouses. And these slaughterhouses -- as you know slaughtering is a cultural taboo in Hinduism, so there are only actually two states where slaughter is legal, but there are also many illegal slaughterhouses. So, these cows are actually rounded up and transported to these slaughterhouses and are slaughtered for beef and also for leather. And India's actually one of the world's top producers of leather and is becoming rapidly one of the world's top producers of beef as well.

MARIANN: Are there CAFOs for dairy in India as well? Is that growing? Because it just seems like with that huge a dairy consumption, it can't be all smallholders.

JESSIKA: At this point, there's actually only one dairy CAFO. It only contains 2500 animals, so at this point there's only been the one dairy CAFO. And the rest of them are just all from these small farms and from individual holders.

JASMIN: Interesting. Yeah, wow. Jessika, what was the most surprising information that emerged from your research?

JESSIKA: The most surprising, I would say, first off was the fact that the majority of these people are lactose intolerant yet they're still there pushing the dairy into these regions like we discussed. But also it's just the sheer size of these CAFOs. Some of them range from 10,000 animals to many of them are actually planning on holding up to 100,000 and more animals. And also one thing that really surprised me is just the lack of concern by policymakers of the consequences of these dairy CAFOs, obviously for the animals but also for environmental reasons and livelihood reasons and the consequences it will have on public health and the community and other types of consequences. There just doesn't seem to be any type of concern for these consequences at all.

MARIANN: Yeah, this information is more than surprising. It's really shocking. I mean, I knew that dairy was growing in China and whatever, but I had no idea of the scale. And it's just so awful to think that it's being done to feed people who aren't even supposed to eat this.

JESSIKA: Exactly.

MARIANN: So is there anything that our listeners can do to help the situation? Most of our listeners are on this side of the planet.

JESSIKA: Mm-hmm, yeah, exactly. And yes there is actually. If you are working or are involved with an organization who has the ability to start a campaign against this, then do so. And the paper actually has many recommendations on the last page. And also, even if you're within the United States, just by going vegan and not contributing to the dairy industry, you are helping. And some of these societies or many of these societies, just to speak generally, they often want to emulate western culture. So, they want to emulate western music and western dress and even western food. For instance, fast food restaurants such as McDonald's are very popular there. So, as veganism becomes more common within the United States and other developed countries, there is a possibility that this could influence the standards that developing countries' societies strive for as well.

JASMIN: We're definitely ahead of the curve with that one. Our listeners are already on board, so that's excellent to hear and I like the perspective of that and how that really effects change there.

MARIANN: Veganism fixes everything!

JASMIN: Jessika, we understand that you will be leaving very soon for Kathmandu to help rescue street dogs.

MARIANN: That's the craziest line I've ever heard in an interview.

JASMIN: Yeah, that's pretty much the coolest thing that I've ever heard of. Can you tell us a bit about that work?

JESSIKA: Yes, so next week I'll be relocating into Kathmandu, Nepal, and I'm involved with an organization there called Street Dog Care. And people can look that up online as well. And we actually offer medical care to the feral dogs within a certain area of Kathmandu and we do a lot of international adoptions and we make sure that they have food and water and just give them -- we try to make their lives as happy and peaceful as possible.

MARIANN: That is great, and we wish you all the luck in the world. And finally, just before we leave you, we know that Brighter Green, who is publishing your paper, has published a lot of these kind of policy papers covering the globalization of factory farming, an issue which so few organizations are really getting to the heart of. Could you describe some of the other papers and where our listeners can find more information?

JESSIKA: Yes, so Brighter Green, they do have several policy papers and in addition to that they also have short video clips and a full-length documentary. In all of these papers they examine how the globalization of industrial animal agriculture is affecting the climate, public health, food security, workers' rights, resource allocation, and of course animal welfare on several developing countries across the world. And these papers, they are free and they are readily available on the website and I would highly encourage everyone to visit. And at the very least just take a few minutes to watch some of the short documentary videos and you'll definitely learn a lot of information from this.

JASMIN: BrighterGreen.org, right?

JESSIKA: Yes, BrighterGreen.org.

MARIANN: Yeah, I encourage everyone to do that. As we all know, even if we were to get to the point where we could fix this problem in this country, that's just a drop in the bucket because we have exported this to the world and we have to find out what's happening all over the world. And Brighter Green does such valuable work in this area as you do, Jessika, and we just thank you so much for joining us today on Our Hen House to enlighten us about this really shocking information about what's going on in Asia, and so that we can wish you a great deal of success in your trip to Kathmandu.

JESSIKA: Thank you, and thank you very much for letting us share this information with you. I really appreciate it.

JASMIN: Please keep us posted on what happens in Kathmandu. We'd love to update our listeners, so definitely let us know. And thank you again.

That was Jessika Ava.