

THE TRIBUNE

THE TRIBUNE |

| WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 20 2024

Opinion



Getty Images/iStockphoto

Turkeys like these are the centerpiece of most Thanksgiving feasts. Author Mark Hawthorne asks us to reconsider the way we celebrate.

This Thanksgiving, ditch the turkey dinner. Here's why

BY MARK HAWTHORNE
Special to The San Luis Obispo Tribune

There is no holiday in the U.S. so closely associated with food as Thanksgiving.

And not just any food, mind you — it must be a turkey. More than 46 million of these birds will be consumed on November 28. And believe me, if turkeys could talk, they'd tell us they have nothing to be thankful for.

Nearly 100% of turkeys killed for food in this country are raised in factory farms, where they never know their mothers or are able to indulge most of their natural instincts. Within the impoverished conditions of these facilities, they are jam-packed into sheds, causing them to violently peck at one another.

Industrial turkey farmers have adapted to this unnatural behavior in cruel ways: Not by giving them more space, but by cutting off parts of their beaks without anesthetics, making it difficult for the birds to eat and drink. The birds also suffer the pain of having a portion of each

toe removed — again, without anesthetics — to keep them from “damaging” other bird’s bodies during mating season.

TURKEY BREEDING

Commercially raised turkeys also cannot reproduce on their own.

They have been bred to grow so rapidly and so large that they are left physically unable to mate; instead, semen is collected from select males, and, in a practice called “breaking the hens,” is inserted into females chosen for breeding.

According to the San Luis Obispo-based non-profit Food Empowerment Project, many industrially raised turkeys die prematurely as their hearts and legs are strained to the point of failure. Those who don't succumb to fatal injuries are slaughtered at 16 to 24 weeks of age. In other words, they are still babies when they are killed.

This would be a heart-breaking experience for any animal, but what has made the domesticated turkey's fate even more tragic is how our society has ridiculed them for decades.

The very word “turkey” has become synonymous with dud or loser. You've likely heard chatter about these birds being “so dumb” that they look up into the clouds during a rainstorm and accidentally drown themselves (a myth for which there is zero evidence).

TURKEY PARDONING

In an annual ceremony officiated by the U.S. president, meanwhile, the “pardoning of the turkey” just before Thanksgiving further mocks them by making the occasion an excuse for the commander-in-chief to make jokes amid laughing members of the White House press corp.

In 1996, for example, President Bill Clinton announced that year's “pardoned” turkey would be going to a petting zoo in Virginia, adding, “We can all be grateful, therefore, that there will be one less turkey in Washington, D.C.”

I have been fortunate to spend time with turkeys who were rescued from animal agriculture, and I can tell you that unlike the cultural stereotypes they are often maligned with,

turkeys are highly social, intelligent and affectionate.

I recall a male turkey named Marvin, who was the unofficial ambassador of the sanctuary for farmed animals where he spent his remaining days. Marvin would hang out near the front gate — staggering under the burden of his genetically developed breast — to be the first to greet visitors. He relished receiving hugs and proudly displaying his plumage.

We are remarkably reluctant to rethink the way we eat and to give animals like turkeys the consideration they deserve.

But as a result of meeting rescued animals like Marvin, I have been a vegan for more than 20 years, and I'm grateful for the many plant-based options we have now in SLO County.

While it may be difficult for many people to imagine observing Thanksgiving without eating a turkey, if there's one thing I have learned about holidays, it's that making compassion the centerpiece of any meal is truly something to celebrate.

San Luis Obispo resident Mark Hawthorne is a long-time animal advocate and the author of “Bleating Hearts: The Hidden World of Animal Suffering.”