

Internet-based learning tool on ethics of animal farming

The Compassion in World Farming (CIWF) Trust in conjunction with The University of Nottingham has produced an internet-based interactive learning tool for students entitled 'The Ethical Matrix: Ethics and Animal Farming'. It has been designed to help teach the ethical, social and economic aspects of farming and is aimed at courses in biology, agriculture, environmental studies, food science, animal science, ecology, geography, citizenship and applied ethics for students aged 16 and over. It is suggested that it is suitable also for introductory university level courses. The package provides three 45-minute sessions for students: the first is a teacher-led discussion; the second, an on-line exercise at the website; and the third, a class discussion of the results of this web exercise.

The whole exercise encourages students to make ethical assessments based on information and claims made on behalf of different interest groups about the impact of organic versus intensive animal farming methods on farmers, consumers, farm animals and the environment. There is a 20-page guide for teachers and lecturers and a seven-page guide for students. These guides provide further information and guidance on how to get the most out of the resource.

When students take part in the interactive web session they have the choice of three different farming systems to assess: pig, poultry and salmon farming. Students are encouraged to assess the ethical impacts of their chosen

intensive production system by comparing statements relating to a corresponding organic system. The students are asked to review statements with regard to farmers' income, workplace and managerial freedom; consumers' choice, affordability, safety and meat quality; fair trade rules; animals' behavioural freedom, welfare and intrinsic value; and conservation, biodiversity and sustainability. The statements made are largely negative with regard to intensive production systems and positive towards organic systems. The arguments lead students to think that organic systems are far better than intensive systems in almost all areas of operation. Little mention is made of the problems that can be associated with organic systems. Had the document been created by a different group of authors it is possible that the balance of the statements would shift. There are references to back up most of the statements used in this exercise; however, some may feel that there is a lack of diversity of opinion throughout the package.

Overall, the web exercise could be a useful addition to introductory teaching about ethical reasoning regarding farm animal production. However, teachers may not wish to use it without also providing students with a broader range of material to ensure that all aspects and points of view of animal farming are carefully considered.

The Ethical Matrix: Ethics and Animal Farming (2003). Available from Education Department, Compassion in World Farming Trust, 5a Charles Street, Petersfield, Hampshire GU32 3EH, UK. Also available at: <http://www.ethicalmatrix.net>.