

Summary of PETA's Investigation Into and Complaints Against Mepkin Abbey

Mepkin Abbey is a Christian monastery (Trappist) in South Carolina that runs an egg factory farm to make money (for a yearly profit of only \$7.00 per hen).¹ In January 2007, a PETA investigation found that the abbey's hens endure constant abuse 24 hours per day, seven days per week for about 18 months—abuse so awful that it would warrant felony cruelty-to-animals charges if dogs or cats were the victims.

Sadly, and for no scientifically tenable reason, South Carolina does not criminalize cruelty to chickens, although they feel pain and fear just as other animals do, understand sophisticated intellectual concepts, learn from watching each other, demonstrate self control, worry about the future, and even have cultural knowledge that is passed from generation to generation. Dr. Chris Evans, who studies animal behavior and communication at Macquarie University in Australia, says, "As a trick at conferences, I sometimes list these attributes, without mentioning chickens, and people think I'm talking about monkeys."²

While it is legal to abuse chickens in South Carolina, it is not legal to lie about it—which Mepkin Abbey does. PETA has filed complaints with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), State Agriculture Department, and attorney general, urging actions to halt Mepkin Abbey's lies.

Mepkin Abbey's Hens Endure Constant Agony

- At the hatcheries that supply Mepkin Abbey, male chicks—"worthless" because they don't produce eggs or develop quickly enough to be sold as meat—are often suffocated in plastic bags, decapitated, crushed, or ground up while still alive.³ Those who survive (the ones who end up at the abbey) have the sensitive tips of their beaks cut off with a hot blade. This procedure, performed without painkillers, not only permanently deprives the hens of the ability to engage in natural behaviors (chickens rely on the use of their beaks to explore their environment) but also causes chronic and acute pain that lasts for more than a month.^{4,5}
- Once at the abbey, the hens are confined to cages so small that they cannot even stretch their wings. Studies document that such conditions result in behavioral problems, as well as severe

¹Deidre C. Mays, *Abbey Says It Meets, Exceeds Guidelines for Treatment of Laying Hens*, Catholic News Service, Feb. 22, 2007, available at <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0701056.htm> ("[E]gg sales make up about 60 percent of the abbey's annual earned income bringing in about \$140,000 a year ...").

²William Grimes, *If Chickens Are So Smart, Why Aren't They Eating Us?* *N.Y. Times*, Jan. 12, 2003, late ed., available at <http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F10810F93D550C718DDDA80894DB404482>.

³Bernard E. Rollin, *Farm Animal Welfare* 134 (Iowa State Press 1995).

⁴"Chickens explore their environment with their beaks. They like to pick things up, and that's their main way of exploring and touching and feeling things." *McDonald's and Farming* (National Public Radio broadcast, Apr. 15, 2002) available at <http://discover.npr.org/features/feature.jhtml?wfid=1141753>.

⁵"When the beak is partially amputated using a hot-blade de-beaker during the growing phase, the severed nerves grow back into the damaged stump and form neuromas (tiny tangled masses of nerve fibres) which then send spontaneous pain signals back to the brain (Beward and Gentle, 1985) ... It has also been found that behavioural changes suggestive of acute pain occur in the two days following surgery and this is followed by changes indicating chronic pain which last at least 5 or 6 weeks after the surgery (Duncan et al., 1989; Gentle et al., 1991)." Ian J.H. Duncan, Col. K.L. Campbell Centre for the Study of Animal Welfare, University of Guelph, *Animal Breeding and Animal Welfare* (June 10, 2000) available at <http://www.carc-crac.ca/common/Farm%20Animal%20Welfare%20Proceedings%202000.PDF>.

osteoporosis and an increased incidence of broken bones.^{6,7} They never breathe fresh air, feel the sun on their backs, build nests, raise their young, or do anything else that God designed them to do.

- When the hens' bodies become so weak that they stop producing eggs, the abbey starves them, using a technique called "feed-withdrawal forced molting" to shock them into another laying cycle (to increase their economic utility). One monk told PETA's investigator that they had *just* starved a shed full of hens (in 2007), and Father Gumula, the abbot, confirmed that the facility used feed-withdrawal forced molts in 2006. This practice is so cruel that up to 5 percent of the hens die during the molt, and many of the surviving hens lose all their feathers and much of their body weight (up to 30 percent). As Dr. Ian Duncan, North America's leading bird welfare expert, explains, "[Forced molting] is a barbaric practice which doubles the mortality in the flock ... and leads to great suffering in all the hens involved."⁸
- Sick and injured hens are often left to suffer. PETA's investigator observed two hens with broken legs who were removed from a cage by one of the monks and left to suffer on the floor of the barn for at least 45 minutes while the monk continued to perform routine chores. The monk callously remarked, "I'll get to them eventually."
- After every last egg has been squeezed from them—which usually takes about 18 months—the abbey ships their hens to gruesome slaughterhouses. Not only does this industry exhaust the hens to death, it also is fully aware of the consequences of its methods; industry participants—including Mepkin Abbey—call these birds "spent hens." At the slaughterhouse, the hens' fragile (and often already broken) legs are forced into tight metal shackles, and they are immobilized (but not rendered insensible to pain) with electrified water.⁹ Next, the birds—still conscious but unable to move—have their throats slit with a metal blade. Many miss the blade and end up at the next stage—the scalding tank—while still able to feel pain.¹⁰

Mepkin Abbey Lies to Consumers About Its Abuse of Birds

- Mepkin Abbey falsely advertises (on its cartons and Web site) that it "comes from a centuries-old tradition of gardening and animal husbandry which cherishes a deep respect for the environment" and that it supports itself "through the caring cultivation of the earth and its creatures."
- Some of the abbey's egg cartons use the defunct United Egg Producers' (UEP) "Animal Care Certified" logo. The UEP discontinued this logo and paid \$100,000 to the District of Columbia

⁶Ian J.H. Duncan, Professor of Applied Ethology, Chair in Animal Welfare, University of Guelph, Letter to Dr. Nancy Halpern, Director, Division of Animal Health, New Jersey Department of Agriculture (June 25, 2003) (on file with PETA); M.C. Appleby et al., *Poultry Behavior and Welfare* 112 (CABI Publishing 2004).

⁷A recent study estimates that between 80 and 89 percent of laying hens suffer from osteoporosis, which is the primary cause of bone fractures in such animals. A.B. Webster, *Welfare Implications of Avian Osteoporosis*, 83 *Poultry Science* 184-92 (2004).

⁸Ian J.H. Duncan, Professor of Applied Ethology, Chair in Animal Welfare, University of Guelph, Letter to Dr. Nancy Halpern, Director, Division of Animal Health, New Jersey Department of Agriculture (June 25, 2003) (on file with PETA)

⁹E.g., F. Boyd, *Humane Slaughter of Poultry: The Case Against the Use of Electrical Stunning Devices*, 7 *Journal of Agric. and Env'tl. Ethics* 221, 224 (1994).

¹⁰See, e.g., USDA, *Poultry Slaughter Inspection Training: Poultry Postmortem Inspection* 15 ("Poultry that die from causes other than slaughter are condemned under the cadaver category. These birds are not dead when they enter the scald vat. When submerged in the hot water, they drown, and the physiological reaction to the heat is that the vasculature in the skin will dilate. This is what causes the skin to become red."), available at http://www.fsis.usda.gov/PDF/PSIT_PostMortem.pdf; see also, USDA, *Poultry Slaughter 2006 Annual Summary* (Feb. 2007) (numbers of birds condemned as cadavers in the United States in 2006), available at <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/current/PoulSlauSu/PoulSlauSu-02-28-2007.pdf>.

and 16 states to settle possible legal action about its deceptive nature (it implied that the UEP had an animal care program).

- On February 21, 2007, Mepkin Abbey claimed in a news release that it is a member of the UEP's "Animal Care Certified program."¹¹ In a subsequent statement, the monastery claimed that it is a member of the "United Egg Producers' (UEP) Certified Animal Welfare Program."¹² In fact, no such programs exist. The UEP has animal husbandry *guidelines* and a certification program for companies that follow its guidelines, but no actual program to ensure the welfare of the hens at the companies it certifies. Moreover, Mepkin Abbey violates what guidelines the UEP does have by using feed-withdrawal forced molting.¹³
- Mepkin Abbey's egg cartons bear slogans like "Fresh from Our Home to Yours" and "Hand Gathered Twice Daily" which imply care that is a far cry from reality.
- Recent published statements by Mepkin Abbey say that allegations of mistreatment are "unfactual" and that its hens are "happy [and] being treated nicely." Their statements that "[w]e treat our animals very humanely" and that each hen is treated "as one of God's precious creatures" have reached millions of consumers through media outlets such as the Associated Press and *The New York Times*, further compounding the misrepresentations that Mepkin Abbey makes to consumers.¹⁴

Mepkin Abbey's Lies Are Illegal

- Federal Trade Commission Act, 15 U.S.C. § 41 *et seq.*, prohibits deceptive acts or practices in or affecting commerce.
- S.C. Code Ann. § 39-5-20 prohibits deceptive trade practices.
- S.C. Code Ann. § 39-39-150 and S.C. Code. Ann. Regs. § 5-230 prohibit advertising that distorts the facts about eggs.

Mepkin Abbey's Abuse Violates Catholic Principles

¹¹Mepkin Abbey, *Response to Criticism of Mepkin's Laying Hens*, original version, Feb 21, 2007 (copy available upon request from PETA).

¹²Mepkin Abbey, *Statement of Mepkin Abbey*, Feb. 22, 2007, available at http://www.mepkinabbey.org/PETA_Response.htm (scroll to right).

¹³Brenda Goodman, *PETA Criticizes Egg Farm at South Carolina Monastery*, N.Y. Times, Feb 21, 2007, available at <http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F60D16F9395A0C728EDDAB0894DF404482>.

¹⁴See:

- Patrick O'Neill, *Trappist Monks' Egg Factory Under Fire as Cruel to Chickens*, National Catholic Reporter, Feb. 21, 2007, available at <http://ncrcafe.org/node/933>.
- Associated Press, *PETA Accuses Monks of Cruelty to Chickens*, Feb. 22, 2007, available at www.kentucky.com/mld/kentucky/new/nation/16754277.htm.
- New York Times News Service, *Controversy Hatches at Lowcountry Monastery*, The State, Feb. 21, 2007, available at <http://www.thestate.com/mld/thestate/16744811.htm>.
- Foxnews.com, *S.C. Monks Deny Cruelty Allegations*, Feb. 21, 2007, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/wires/2007Feb21/0,4670,MonksChickens,00html>.
- USA Today.com, *PETA Calls "Fowl" on Monastery*, Feb. 21, 2007, available at http://blogs.usatoday.com/ondeadline/2007/02/peta_calls_fowl.html.
- Adam Parker, *Abbey Counters PETA Accusations of Cruelty*, The Post and Courier Charleston.net, Feb. 22, 2007, available at http://www.charleston.net/assets/webPages/departamental/news/default_pf.aspx?NEWSID=131586.
- Kathleen Dayton, *PETA Criticizes Mepkin Abbey's Egg Farm*, Charleston Regional Business Journal, Feb. 21, 2007, available at http://www.charlestonbusiness.com/dailyjournal/2_92/full-issue.html.
- Mepkin Abbey, *Response to Criticism of Mepkin's Laying Hens*, Feb. 21, 2007, available at http://www.mepkinabbey.org/PETA_Response.htm.

- Pope Benedict XVI has condemned the very practices employed by Mepkin Abbey: “Animals, too, are God’s creatures Certainly, a sort of industrial use of creatures, so that geese are fed in such a way as to produce as large a liver as possible, or **hens live so packed together that they become just caricatures of birds**, this degrading of living creatures to a commodity seems to me in fact to contradict the relationship of mutuality that comes across in the Bible” (*emphasis added*).
- The Catechism of the Catholic Church declares: “Animals are God’s creatures. He surrounds them with his providential care. By their mere existence they bless him and give him glory. Thus men owe them kindness. We should recall the gentleness with which saints like St. Francis of Assisi or St. Philip Neri treated animals.”
- Christ himself compared his feelings for humankind to the feelings of a mother hen who wants to protect her chicks (Luke 13:34).