

Time for an outright ban on Lagomorph Meat

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Is it time for an outright ban on Lagomorph Meat?

In the U.K., there are approximately 1.5 million rabbits as household pets, ranking them as the third most popular pet.¹ A sentiment echoed in the U.S, with rabbits also featured as the third most popular pet.²

Yet the lagomorph³ (hares, rabbits, and pikas) have poor legislative protection compared to their counterparts, being the top one and two ranked pets - dogs and cats.

But why do a few percentage points in the pet ranking, mean rabbits are afforded such little protection?

1. Rabbits are considered vermin because they are abundant in nature and therefore destructive

The European wild rabbit evolved around 4,000 years ago on the Iberian Peninsula.⁴ Rabbits were introduced to Britain during the 12th Century, and during the Middle Ages, the breeding and farming of rabbits for meat and fur became widespread throughout Europe. Some accounts suggested that women among the Medieval gentry even kept rabbits as pets. *So where did it all go wrong for these pets?*

Rabbits were brought into Britain from France by the Normans and kept in managed warrens. However, these animals escaped into the wild and prospered. Since their great escape, rabbits have been blamed for much disruption:

- Property damage: burrowing into gardens, parks, etc. causing damage to lawns and other structures, leading to subsidence.
- Crop damage: causing significant damage to agricultural crops, resulting in financial losses for agricultural and horticultural industries.
- Ecological damage: negatively impact the environment by overgrazing on vegetation, leading to soil erosion and changes in habitat structure.

For many of these reasons outlined above biological warfare and The Pest Act 1954 was introduced to control among other animals, rabbits and hares; such legislation, facilitated people hunting rabbits for food, sport etc.

The warfare focused on an introduction of man-made diseases such as Myxomatosis⁵, Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease Virus⁶, which indeed decimated the wild rabbit population. *However, since 1954, rabbits still present the risks outlined above – so what has changed? Or perhaps we should ask ourselves what suitable rabbit safe methods can we deploy to curb their destruction?*

¹ <https://www.ukpetfood.org/information-centre/statistics/uk-pet-population.html>

² <https://www.morrisanimalfoundation.org/article/rabbits-bunnies-pet-health-adoption#:~:text=January%2019%2C%202023%20%E2%80%94%20Rabbits%20are,special%20care%2C%20attention%20and%20training>

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagomorpha>

⁴ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10344-012-0664-9>

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myxomatosis>

⁶ <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/agriculture-land/animal/health/rabbit-haemorrhagic-disease-virus>

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We all know rabbits breed like rabbits and yet we continue to farm rabbits, as if there are not enough in the wild?

In fact, according to The British Rabbit Council, there are over 50 recognised breeds and over 500 varieties!⁷ Perpetuating the myth that we are indeed overrun with rabbits, since we feel the need to breed more and exacerbate the problem of rabbit cruelty⁸.

2. **Farmed for food**

Rabbits are the fourth most farmed animal in the world. Farmed rabbits are domesticated animals, much like your childhood pet 'Thumper.'

They exhibit the same characteristics and traits as that of their wild counterparts, but due to intensive rabbit farming, these behaviours are thwarted.⁹

Housed in bare wire cages of a height of 45cm, crammed with 8 or more rabbits; the cage surface area is that of an A4 paper!¹⁰ The rabbits are unable to move let alone clean themselves; spending their entire short miserable lives in cramped tiny, filthy cages, until they are slaughtered around 8-12 weeks.

As the cages are stacked upon one another, urine and faecal matter will cascade onto rabbits housed in the lower cages.

Intensive rabbit farming is as the name suggests 'intensive', there is little luxury afforded to these animals including access to adequate food, water, air circulation and hygiene.

In fact, many animals die prematurely due to the deplorable conditions, the mortality rates for commercially farmed rabbits are higher when compared to other livestock.

"Typically, 100 - 120% of breeding does die or are culled and replaced each year, and 15 to 30% of fattening rabbits die before slaughter.¹¹" The primary cause of high mortalities are due to respiratory, intestinal diseases" as well as injury and starvation; as many young infants fall through the wire cages, animal husbandry is poor, these animals starve to death if not killed by the fall.

Due to the crowded living conditions, many rabbits' resorts to cannibalism due to the anxiety of having their liberties infringed. We are all familiar with the B.S.E. crisis, "supplementing protein in cattle feed by meat-and-bone meal (MBM),"¹² the danger of feeding vegetarian animals' meat!

⁷ <https://thebritishrabbitcouncil.org/>

⁸ <https://www.petpeoplesplace.com/news/96-rabbits-are-uk-s-most-neglected-pets.htm>

⁹ <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/farm-animals/rabbits/rabbit-welfare/>

¹⁰ <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/farm/rabbits/farming#:~:text=Farming%20rabbits%20for%20meat,about%20how%20they're%20farmed.>

¹¹ <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/farm-animals/rabbits/rabbit-welfare/>

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom_BSE_outbreak

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It is common for animals to be housed with deceased rotting animals and thus contracting disease, that then enters the food chain.

Currently there is no species-specific legislation protecting the welfare of farmed rabbits in the EU. In fact, many countries classify rabbits as poultry such as the U.K. and U.S.¹³

But rabbit farming is not as popular in the U.K.?

Within the European Union production can reach 300 million rabbits a year. To put this cruelty into context, rabbit farming is a significant industry worldwide, yielding a total production of 861 thousand tons of rabbit meat in 2021.

Production is concentrated in Asia (48.8%), Europe (28.4%), Americas (18.1%), and Africa (4.7%).

Countries Based on Data from the FAO Statistical Database (FAO Stat) in 2021

Ranks	Countries	Production of Meat from Rabbit in 2021
		(Tons)
1	China, mainland	462,681
2	Democratic People's Republic of Korea	131,126
3	Egypt	72,000
4	France	25,707
5	Russian Federation	18,719
6	Ukraine	10,900
7	Algeria	8,474
8	Sierra Leone	8,142
9	Mexico	4,496
10	Rwanda	3,751

Source: FAOSTAT, 2023

As previously stated, rabbit farming is not as popular in the U.K. as evidenced by T&S Rabbits farm, previous bids to expand¹⁴ its enterprise and resultant closure.¹⁵ Much of the farmed rabbit will be imported into the U.K. from the E.U. and China, which also have poor safeguarding controls for rabbit welfare.

So what rabbits are food – who cares?

Does (female rabbits) are given hormone treatments to control their reproductive cycles and ensure they are ready to breed. They have been genetically modified to produce larger litters. Once their last litter is born, they are artificially inseminated within 11 days.¹⁶ The

¹³ http://www.rabbitadvocacy.com/usda_classifies_rabbits_as_poult.htm

¹⁴ <https://www.peta.org.uk/blog/derbyshire-rabbit-ts-nurseries/>

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-nottinghamshire-62590106>

¹⁶ <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/farm-animals/rabbits/rabbit-welfare/>

constant reproductive cycle leads to loss of body condition, metabolic diseases, and increase the risk of spinal deformities.

However, the use of hormones in inception is only the beginning, to highlight the overuse of chemicals. Rabbit meat is difficult to produce in vast quantities, as rabbits are vulnerable and prone to disease. Their immune systems are weaker than other captive-bred animals used for meat.

Rabbits therefore need lots of antibiotics to protect them from disease, giving rise to antibiotic resistance. *But what does this mean for us?*

Per the Review on Antimicrobial Resistance, “large quantities of antibiotics lead to the rise of superbugs which has created an enormous threat to global human health in that drug-resistant infections have the potential to kill 10 million people a year by 2050.”

Further, it is not uncommon for rabbit meat to contain disease such as Cysticercosis and Tularemia. Indeed, solely subsisting on a diet of rabbits can cause protein poisoning.

So, is it worth it?

If your body is a temple, would you be willing to risk your health on the over exposure of antibiotics, disease and chemicals?

Still don't care?

As previously stated, legislation pertaining to rabbit farming is poor and unregulated. It is an industry that thrives on enhancing the bottom line, with healthcare standards a sacrificial guideline at best. With this in mind, ethics and welfare are not top priorities, but profit is profit at a minimal cost!

‘Stack them high and sell them’, this is the mentality of the farms, which means while you are consuming rabbit, you cannot ascertain whether your rabbit was disease free, euthanised or died prematurely then entered the food chain; due to the inadequate regulations resulting in authorities failing to inspect the quality of rabbits entering the food chain.

But how do you know you are actually eating rabbit?

During the war¹⁷ eating cat¹⁸ and dog meat¹⁹ became routine to starve off famine. For clarity cats are obligate carnivores²⁰ and dogs are omnivores.²¹ There has been much discussion that humans should solely consume animals that are herbivores.

However, humans eat many animals that are omnivores such as pigs²², chickens,²³ as well as those that are carnivores such as tuna, shark, cod etc.

¹⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLS3op_BTr8

¹⁸ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/inside-vietnams-horror-cat-meat-30497086>

¹⁹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/03/31/audio-recording-reveals-russian-troops-eating-dogs-ration-packs/>

²⁰ <https://blog.homesalive.ca/cat-blog/are-cats-omnivores>

²¹ <https://vetadvises.com/are-dogs-omnivores/#:~:text=Dogs%20are%20considered%20omnivores%2C%20as%20they%20have%20the,derive%20nutrients%20from%20both%20plant%20and%20animal%20sources.>

²² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pig>

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As previously stated, much of our rabbit meat is imported and unless all rabbit meat is inspected and regulated there is no way to verify that 'roof rabbit'^{24 25} is not being ingested, after all when dressed, cats look remarkably like rabbits. There is no way to know this fact until you are informed, case in point the 2013 horse meat scandal.²⁶

The scandal highlighted the lax regulation²⁷ within the EU on foods and meat. In parts of Europe, foods were advertised as containing beef, when in fact they were found to contain portions of undeclared horse meat and pork, in some samples, the entire food comprised horse meat.

Still don't care – Meat is meat?

Rather ironically, despite being a pet, rabbits are also food for other pets. Pet food manufacturers use ingredients that are surplus to requirements in the human food chain.

However, the tide is changing; given the poor rabbit welfare standards many supermarkets are no longer stocking intensively farmed rabbit meat in their U.K. supermarkets, meaning an end to any pet food containing said meat.²⁸

Not all supermarkets are following suit, and it is perfectly possible that intensively farmed rabbit meat is making its way into your pet's diet, depending on where you shop. With this in mind, there is no way to verify whether your cat Simba is being fed 'roof rabbits'!

What about banning rabbit meat from an ethical standpoint?

There are prescribed ways to slaughter rabbits but due to the lack of legislative protection worldwide, it is commonplace for crude unethical methods to be used.

Rabbits in the U.S. are categorised by the government as "poultry", which means there are no rules or regulations for them and as a consequence they are not inspected by the USDA. The FDA is the authority that conducts inspections, this is on the proviso that companies pay for one, if not then no inspection occurs.

Due to a lack of regulation, such scenarios are commonplace, in 2015, investigators from animal protection charity Last Chance for Animals did an exposé of Pel Freez processing plant in Arkansas, which is the largest rabbit slaughterhouse in America.

The workers did attempt to stun rabbits with the dull edge of a knife but many of the rabbits remained conscious. Their legs were then broken, and they began to scream. Finally, shackled upside down, their heads were cut off, with a blunt knife.²⁹ There were instances where the knife slipped, and the rabbit's ear were cut off.

²³<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicken#:~:text=Chickens%20are%20omnivores.,years%2C%20depending%20n%20the%20breed.>

²⁴ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/animal-lover-butchered-100-cats-9372356>

²⁵ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230116-algeria-warns-citizens-after-cat-meat-sold-as-rabbit/>

²⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_horse_meat_scandal

²⁷ <https://www.irishtimes.com/health/2023/01/07/a-decade-on-how-the-horsemeat-scandal-changed-the-way-the-world-thinks-of-food-safety/>

²⁸ <https://www.four-paws.org.uk/our-stories/campaign-successes/victory-for-rabbits>

²⁹ <https://sentientmedia.org/inside-the-dark-world-of-rabbit-farming/>

“A worker had numerous scratches and bite marks from the rabbits struggling to survive as he was killing them ... The rabbits will cry almost like an infant with loud shrieking noises.”³⁰

In fact, poor rabbit welfare standards have been noted in France,³¹ Spain³² and China.

Have we learned nothing from the Covid pandemic?

As well as animal welfare, what of the individuals. Of concern, is the necessary close contact between humans and body fluids from butchered animals, particularly rabbits due to their small size, proximity is required, and this dramatically increases the risk that more deadly and/or pandemic causing viruses like COVID-19 will emerge.³³

In fact, it has been reported as of 19th January 2024³⁴, the World Health Organization (W.H.O.) are now taking steps to plan for the next mass world illness termed “Disease X”.

A statement from 2022 defines ‘Disease X’ as” an unknown pathogen that could cause a serious international epidemic.”

3) Rabbit meat - Ethical meat that is climate friendly

Rabbit farming is touted as the most efficient way to produce high-quality protein while taking up an extremely small environmental footprint and is even marketed as such to developing countries.

But how true is this?

Having read the article, it is clear; rabbit meat is anything but ethical – it is a life of cruelty from birth to death.

But with an exploding population to feed, should cruelty be our primary concern?

Intensive farming has demonstrated that rabbits can be caged in deplorable conditions and prosper thanks to antibiotics and other drugs. In developing countries, where money can be a scarce resource, where will farmers find funds for medicine let alone rabbit feed? Thus, reiterating the point of sub-standard meat in the food chain.

In today’s environmentally conscious society, let’s contextualise how climate friendly rabbit meat is, it is less harmful to the environment than beef, with carbon emissions per kilogram of protein, thought to be higher than both pork and chicken.

Just 212 grams of rabbit meat can produce as much as one kilogram of greenhouse gases. To put this into context, rabbit meat is almost five times as polluting as lentils.

Although rabbits are small, they can consume four times their body weight in food. It takes an estimated four pounds of feed to make just one pound of meat.

³⁰ <http://www.rabbitadvocacy.com/images/usda%20rabbits.jpg>

³¹ <https://www.eurogroupforanimals.org/news/l214-investigation-french-rabbit-farm-shows-its-time-endthecageage>

³² <https://www.eurogroupforanimals.org/news/investigation-reveals-intense-suffering-rabbit-farms-spain>

³³ <https://rabbit.org/2022/02/covid-19/>

³⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/disease-x-next-pandemic-covid-who-b2481333.html>

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Rather ironic, since rabbits have been labelled as an end to world hunger. A farmer has conflicting interests to ensure sufficient crops are produced for rabbit feed and human consumption.

When kept in large numbers, rabbits also produce a high concentration of ammonia, which causes poor air ventilation,³⁵ thus contributing to disease.

4) Religions perception on animals

Often, we look to religious text to confirm guidance on animals in terms of companion pets or food.

In the Jewish tradition, individuals are not prohibited from keeping dogs as pets, but biblical and rabbinic sources do include numerous references that associate dogs with violence and uncleanness, grimacing at the practice of keeping dogs as pets. The negative attitude toward dogs persists in the Talmud, which frequently regards dogs as dangerous animals.³⁶

While this might seem outdated, there are many modern-day examples of some dogs attacking individuals.³⁷

In the context of the Bible, dogs sometimes appear in negative contexts, such as in insults, they are however not listed as ritually “unclean” animals.³⁸

Under the Mosaic Law, animals were categorised into two broad groups: clean and unclean. Rabbits were placed in the “unclean” category, meaning they could not be used as sacrifices and could not be eaten by the Jews. This status was determined based on the description: “The rabbit, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof; it is unclean for you” (Leviticus 11:6). This verse is often misstated in the Bible, since rabbits and hares do not chew cud. Rabbits definitely do not “chew the cud,” in the modern, scientific sense of the phrase.³⁹

Some religions condemn the eating of rabbits.

5) Rabbits as pets

Rabbits are social animals and best housed in pairs. These sentient creatures perform great as therapy pets⁴⁰ due to their gentle nature. This companion animal has an average⁴¹ lifespan between eight to twelve years,⁴² in many cases out living dogs.

They are highly intelligent⁴³ and can be taught to respond to commands using positive reward-based training. They bond immensely with other rabbits as well as their human⁴⁴ families.

³⁵ <https://sentientmedia.org/inside-the-dark-world-of-rabbit-farming/>

³⁶ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/judaism-dogs/>

³⁷ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/rspca-seeks-judicial-review-into-xl-bully-dog-ban/ar-AA1mdd4t>

³⁸ <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-near-eastern-world/what-does-the-bible-say-about-dogs/>

³⁹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/rabbits-chew-cud.html>

⁴⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/F5RSBIB/>

⁴¹ <https://www.bluecross.org.uk/advice/rabbit/wellbeing-and-care/how-long-do-rabbits-live>

⁴² <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/70887-oldest-rabbit-ever>

⁴³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNJmeXb4Y0A>

⁴⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/cambridgeshire/3441337.stm>

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They can be trained to do tricks and run agility courses,⁴⁵ just like dogs and they use litter boxes,⁴⁶ just like cats. They are sweet, funny, empathetic, and loyal. They express pain, fear and joy just as humans.

*But not everyone appreciates the *Oryctolagus cuniculus*.*⁴⁷

It is most apparent that rabbits are the most mistreated and devalued animal. Even the royal marines⁴⁸ and army⁴⁹ bludgeons domestic rabbits⁵⁰ for food, as part of their current⁵¹ survival 'training,' despite most areas of deployment being towns with animals such as cats and dogs⁵² and not countryside settings.

In order to redress the disparity between the top two pets and the top third pets, we firstly need to address legislation to protect rabbits, much like the law that exists to protect cats and dogs.

Looking at the current legislative offerings, it is evident that there is scope for significant improvement.

In 2018, Compassion in World Farming raised their concerns about rabbit farming to Parliament via written evidence, stating "The conditions in which farmed rabbits are subject to would be illegal if they were hens."⁵³

It further added that it "would like to see a ban on the import of rabbit fur or, at the very least, labelling to indicate if it is real fur that has been imported into the UK."

Their statement had reference to a proposed caged rabbit farm in Gnosall, Staffordshire that purported to use a loophole in the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Act 2000 which saw the sale of rabbit meat as a primary product and rabbit skins as a by-product.

The application to ban the import of rabbit fur was rejected and the appeal dismissed by Parliament.

Not all legal loopholes are left open. In the same year, 2018, under U.K. law dog meat could not be purchased or sold, but if the dog was legally your property you could humanely despatch it and eat it.

While there had been conflicting comments regarding the rise in the consumption of dog meat in the U.K., *to date no statistics were obtainable*. It is common knowledge that many tourists from Britain and other countries do visit countries that serve dog and eat these dishes.

⁴⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnW3ciLBmJk>

⁴⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gl1eoRJCvc>

⁴⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbit>

⁴⁸ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1997-03-20/debates/b456b5c9-b457-4acd-bd56-df932905b7dc/DomesticRabbits>

⁴⁹ <https://www.peta.org/media/news-releases/air-force-academy-fire-training-rabbits-apparently-beaten-killed-skinned-eaten/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.wearethemighty.com/articles/the-air-force-told-peta-it-will-continue-to-kill-rabbits-in-survival-training/>

⁵¹ <https://support.peta.org/page/1268/action/1?locale=en-US>

⁵² <https://www.ibtimes.com/russian-soldiers-are-eating-dogs-ukraine-today-we-ate-yorkie-3527052>

⁵³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/87360/html/>

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Nevertheless, according to the Humane Society International it has never encountered “any evidence to suggest that dog meat is being consumed in the UK”. Yet in 2019⁵⁴, Dog Meat Consumption⁵⁵ was discussed twice with a view to enacting legislation, subsequent to this; the UK Parliament amended the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill to include a ban on dog and cat meat.

Prior to a proposed ban on dog meat, following persuasive legislation from the U.S:

Theresa May’s spokesperson stated, “the UK has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world and we wish to maintain that.”⁵⁶

Defra’s spokesperson stated “Britain is a nation of animal lovers, and we are proud to have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world.”⁵⁷

Except if you are a rabbit.

Per U.K. Parliament Hansard Volume 654 regarding banning dog meat consumption, “This Bill, therefore, is not just about consuming dogs but about the extra suffering and cruelty involved.”⁵⁸

Given the fact that farmed rabbits suffer an equally cruel fate as dogs, it is therefore time that legislation was proposed to ban the consumption of rabbit meat in the U.K.

After all rabbits are as much our companions, as dogs are. Further, they emit human child-like⁵⁹ noises⁶⁰ when faced with fear of danger, making them more anthropomorphic than cats and dogs.

Thank you for taking the time to read this document.

Please find a link below to the petition to Ban the consumption of rabbit meat in the U.K.

<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/659576>

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<https://hoptosaverabbits.org/>

⁵⁴ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2019-0045/>

⁵⁵ <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2353>

⁵⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-45085514>

⁵⁷ <https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/pm-under-pressure-to-ban-eating-of-dogs-in-britain>

⁵⁸ [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-02-19/debates/9FA84D35-9B95-4529-B787-22F5D8C43EC7/DogMeat\(Consumption\)\(Offences\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-02-19/debates/9FA84D35-9B95-4529-B787-22F5D8C43EC7/DogMeat(Consumption)(Offences))

⁵⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltgdywrNWsM>

⁶⁰ <https://homeandroost.co.uk/blog/understanding-rabbit-noises/>

⁶¹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/265741706257111>

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