Octopuses: In Need of More Protection Than We Think

In the fight to protect animals from cruelty and preserve safe living and farming conditions for these species, not all creatures are created equal. It’s easy to rally people around the goal of protection when it comes to innocent, fluffy puppies being tortured in puppy mills, or cute day-old chicks being inhumanely separated from their mothers and violently slaughtered in poultry production plants. A growing number of people have even decided to forgo purchasing or adopting from problematic institutions, such as dog breeding centers or farms that practice inhumane treatment in order to reduce the suffering of helpless animals. Some people have even become vegetarian so that they won’t contribute to the suffering of animals farmed for meat under cruel conditions. While all of these steps are great ways to help protect animals prevalent in our everyday lives, we shouldn’t forget about the creatures inhabiting the planet that are less cuddly or cute. One example of this is the majestic octopus. When most people think of animals that suffer from animal cruelty, the ocean-dwelling octopus probably isn’t the first thing that comes to mind. However, octopuses are actually highly-intelligent creatures that, while in captivity or being farmed for food, are often treated inhumanely and deserve as much protection from cruelty as other animals do.

Octopuses are cephalopods, in the same family as squids and cuttlefish, and generally inhabit the coastal oceans where they live, eat, and reproduce in underground caves and crevices, known as dens. They are solitary creatures that are highly territorial over their dens and have been scientifically proven to be some of the most intelligent animals on the planet (“Octopuses”). As we have studied these fascinating creatures, scientists have learned that octopuses are able to make and use tools, think critically to catch prey and evade predators, and experience emotions such as curiosity. While their popularity as a food is nowhere near as large as other
sea-inhabiting creatures, such as many species of fish, octopuses are considered a delicacy in many cuisines and their popularity as a dish has been increasing in recent years. However, octopus farming is a highly troubling industry that raises many ethical questions about the treatment and farming of such intelligent animals. Recently, octopus farming has been in the news due to the plans by the food company Nueva Pescanova to create the world’s first indoor octopus farm, a plan which has been widely condemned by scientists who argue that due to the known sentience and intelligence of octopuses, breeding and killing them in captivity is wildly inhumane (Hamilton). In recent years, octopuses have been found by scientists to experience complex emotions such as excitement and joy, but also fear and pain, raising concerns by scientists and activist groups including the Compassion in World Farming organization about the way the food company plans to slaughter the animals for food. The process Nueva Pescanova intends to use involves submerging the octopuses in a freezing water and ice slurry without pre-stunning or painkillers until they die, a process which has been shown to be cruelly inhumane as it causes a prolonged painful death for the animals (“Uncovering”). This is one of the main arguments against octopus farming because at this time, there is no known humane way to slaughter octopuses, meaning that any and all octopuses farmed for food will be subjected to some kind of torturous death.

Another reason why scientists are calling for change in the octopus farming industry is due to the animals’ treatment while in captivity. Octopuses have shown that they are capable of experiencing boredom, and have been proven to be curious creatures capable of solving problems and making tools, on par with other “intelligent” species such as chimpanzees and parrots. Because of this, many experts argue that keeping octopuses in captivity, especially in a large-scale industrial setting such as that of an octopus farm, is inhumane in itself. The captivity
settings proposed for farming by Nueva Pescanova state that the octopuses will be kept in large tanks with other octopuses, causing concern by scientists for a number of reasons. First, octopuses are inherently solitary creatures, meaning that forcing them to live together in enclosed environments could potentially lead to aggression, territorialism, and even cannibalism as a result from the stress of living in a dense environment. It’s been shown that animals kept in captivity are far more likely to develop aggressive, destructive, or neurotic conditions than those who live in their natural habitat. Second, octopuses, which are light-averse creatures, will be subjected to overhead lighting at all times, which, again, could potentially contribute to the development of harmful behaviors. Third, it is highly possible for disease or infections to spread between the octopuses due to their high-density environment (“Uncovering”). All of these factors do not only apply to the proposed octopus farm at Nueva Pescanova: they are also critiques of other institutions where octopus are kept captive, whether for farming or for entertainment, such as at “aquaparks” like SeaWorld. The bottom line is: octopuses (as well as their other cephalopod relatives, squids, cuttlefish, and nautilus) are not suitable for captivity under the large majority of circumstances. In the event that they are kept in captivity, such as in zoos and other educational establishments (which is still discouraged by teuthologists, or scientists who study cephalopods), extreme care must be taken to ensure that they have proper conditions similar to what would be found in their natural habitat and that they are kept in a stimulating environment so that they do not experience crippling boredom, which has been shown in many creatures to be the cause of depression and self-destructive habits (Young). Their treatment and environment is another major concern of scientists who warn against octopus farming and the keeping of octopuses in captivity.
Yet another reason why keeping octopuses in captivity is problematic is because it causes environmental concerns about the ocean food chain and overfishing. For every octopus that is kept captive, it must be fed fish at a 3:1 ratio, so for every one octopus’s weight, three times the weight of fish must be killed to feed them. This could lead to extreme overfishing as companies must fish heavily to feed the octopuses, raising concerns about problems in the ocean food chain due to the number of fish being taken out of it (Porter). The majority of land animals that are farmed are herbivores, but sea life being farmed, including octopuses, often require meat to be fed. This leads to even more farming that is necessary and potential disruption to the ocean ecosystem. The overfishing of species taken from the ocean to feed the octopuses in captivity also reduces the number of fish for wild octopuses to eat, which could lead to food deprivation and even starvation for wild octopuses whose food has been depleted due to overfishing.

So, what can be done to protect octopuses from being treated inhumanely in farms and entertainment settings? Sorry to all the calamari, octopus salad, and takoyaki lovers out there: the overall best way to protect octopuses is to stop eating them (Knowles). When people refuse to buy octopuses to eat, the octopus farming industry doesn’t profit. Therefore, the demand for octopuses is lower and they are farmed less, reducing the potential for cruelty in farming settings. This solution may be disappointing to those who enjoy eating octopus: it’s considered a delicacy in many places around the world—primarily Japan, the Mediterranean, and the United States—and the popularity of the octopus as a food is growing. Personally, I used to enjoy foods with cephalopods in them. In fact, for the majority of my life, I have considered calamari and takoyaki to be some of the most delicious foods in the world. However, after learning about the problematic nature of octopus farming, I can no longer in good conscience eat octopuses—or any cephalopods, for that matter. “No one who considers themselves interested in the inner lives of
animals, the wonders and mysteries of the natural world, [should] eat cephalopods,” said Elle Hunt, a writer who chronicled her experience of learning about the lives of octopuses in an article for The Guardian (Hunt). While it may not seem like an effective effort (“I’ll just order the calamari this one time–it won’t make that much of a difference!”), every octopus not on your plate is one potentially still in its natural habitat, living freely in its wild home. At this point in time, so little is still known about the reclusive and mysterious lives of octopuses. If we don’t fight for the protection of them and their environments, and their just treatment in captive settings, we might not ever get the chance to fully understand these magnificent creatures, who may be more like us than we think.
Lucy Kershen, *Octopuses: In Need of More Protection Than We Think*, 6

**Works Cited**


"Uncovering the Horrifying Reality of Octopus Farming." PDF.