

The foie gras industry funds scientific publications to help defend its practice of force-feeding birds.

French scientists to the rescue of foie gras: a bit of science, a lot of bad faith

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Foie gras is produced by force-feeding ducks or geese so as to enlarge their liver up to ten times its normal size. To fend off bans threatening this practice, the foie gras industry has commissioned scientific publications aimed at denying that it is detrimental to the birds' health and welfare. A book published in France sheds light on these financial conflicts of interest and on the methods used to enlist scientists in an organized campaign to manipulate opinion.

Considered incompatible with animal protection laws, the practice of force-feeding has already been banned in most European Union countries. Israel halted production in 2005 after a Supreme Court decision stating that “the ‘needs of agriculture’ do not always override the interest of animal protection”.(1) The state of California voted for a law making force-feeding illegal starting in 2012. The city of Chicago has outlawed the sale of foie gras since August, 2006. Alderman Joe Moore, who sponsored this ordinance, said, “Our laws are a reflection of our culture. Our culture does not condone the torture of innocent and defenseless creatures”.(2)

Thus threatened, the foie gras industry has adopted a method dear to the tobacco lobby: the funding of scientific publications.

Most of this funding is allocated to a small group of scientists from INRA, the French National Institute for Agricultural Research. These researchers claim to have “undertaken studies aimed at providing the debate with objective data”(3), and conclude that “there is no scientific fact that suggests that this procedure is detrimental to the well-being of the animals”.(4)

Drawing from the conclusions of these experts, foie gras producers succeeded in passing a law through French Parliament in 2005 that legitimizes force-feeding in France, based



“There is no scientific fact that suggests that this procedure is detrimental to the well-being of the animals,” claims Daniel Guéméné, a French scientist whose research is funded by foie gras producers.

on the argument that “from a scientific point of view, there is no doubt” that force feeding is conducted “without stress or suffering to the animal”.(5) Artisan Farmers Alliance, the lobby group for the foie gras industry in the USA, also bases much of its case for

defending the practice of force-feeding on the INRA studies, presenting them as hard science from independent, renowned experts.

The dark side of the story, revealed in a book published in France at the

Antoine Comiti, *L'INRA au secours du foie gras* (The INRA to the Rescue of Foie Gras), Éditions Sentience, Paris, November 2006, 270 pages, 25 €.

This book, written in French, is available in bookstores in France and Belgium. For delivery to another country, or to be notified about the publication of the English version (planned for 2008), please address inquiries to contact@stopgavage.com.

The controversy that emerged from this book's publishing received widespread coverage in the French media. (see reprints at the end of article) (6) (7) (8)



end of 2006 (see inset on previous page), paints a less rosy picture. It actually represents a typical example of scientific publications controlled by an industry, publications in which the researchers involved knowingly hide facts that are negative to the commissioners of the studies.

A Conflict of Interest

As the investigation in this book shows, the studies in question were ordered and commissioned by foie gras producers, with the express goal of “creating a scientific argument in favor of foie gras production”.(9) Backed by solid evidence, this investigation shows how several facts proving the harmfulness of force-feeding were knowingly dismissed by scientists in charge of these studies.

It has been well-established that research funded by an industry tends to draw conclusions that are favorable to that same industry (see inset below). Concerning foie gras, the INRA scientists’ conclusions could not be more in favor of those who ordered the studies – they correspond, point by point, to the arguments that a marketing study recommends to the foie gras industry “in order to most effectively resist the inevitable attacks and pressure from the media, and to reassure the foie gras consumer”.(10)

Healthy Cadavers

Among the existing arguments in favor of foie gras is that of the “reversibility” of force-feeding. In response

The eerie silence surrounding the million birds who die each year during force-feeding

The mortality rate for animals used in foie gras production can be found in the statistics published each year by the foie gras industry.(16) Out of the number of palmipeds that are force-fed each year, it is common to find that **more than a million birds die each year in France during force-feeding.**(17)



A scientific report by the European Commission in 1998 (18) shows that **the mortality rate of force-fed birds is 10 to 20 times higher than that of the same birds in standard rearing conditions.**

to a journalist asking, “Is foie gras the product of a sick liver?” Gérard Guy, the director of the foie gras experimentation unit at INRA, responds, “The scientists’ answer is clear. The answer is no. Foie gras is not the product of a sick liver. And I can cite two studies (in which) researchers demonstrated reversibility in animals. For example, if the force feeding of a goose is interrupted, we see that its liver will return to normal”.(11)

With all the authority delegated to his expert opinion, this researcher states that only incurable illnesses are true illnesses... Others, as serious as they may seem, are actually not so because they can be cured!

To back up their claim that the livers of force-fed birds are not diseased, the INRA researchers reference six articles (12), all authored by Geneviève Bénard (among others). In addition to being a member of the Scientific Council of the

CIV, the French Meat Information Center, the official lobby organization of the French meat industry, Geneviève Bénard is also a member of the Research and Development Commission of CIFO, the French foie gras producers’ association.(13) One of these articles opens with this show of support: “In an animal welfare context, we should be looking for ever more demonstrative experimental arguments in order to defend, particularly in the European context, the foie gras industry”.(14)

These studies, even though they were undertaken to demonstrate the harmlessness of force-feeding, reveal a few surprising facts. One of them shows that more than 6% of birds released after 10 to 16 days of force-feeding died. “The mortality rate increases with the length of force-feeding (...). The animals that died had difficulty moving and, therefore, were unable to drink”.(15) Some birds were so weakened that they were no

The influence of funding on scientific results

What’s the point in asking who funds which study? Doesn’t the scientific method guarantee the researchers’ objectivity? The fact is, proof of the influence that funding has on the results of scientific studies is piling up. By analyzing 106 studies determining the dangers of secondhand smoke, a prestigious medical journal showed in 1998 that “the only factor (statistically) associated with the review’s conclusion was whether the author was affiliated with the tobacco industry. Three quarters of the articles concluding that passive smoking was not harmful were written by tobacco industry affiliates”.(19) In 2003, an analysis of 1140 medical studies confirmed the influence of funding sources beyond the case of tobacco: “we found that industry-sponsored studies were significantly more likely to reach conclusions that were favorable to the sponsor”.(20)

longer even capable of getting up to drink and died of thirst under the experimenters' watch.

In addition to the animals that die despite discontinuing force-feeding, those that die *during* force-feeding need to be accounted for: according to statistics from the foie gras industry itself, more than a million ducks and geese die each year during force-feeding in France (see inset on previous page).

What do INRA researchers conclude from such observations? That force-feeding affects birds' vital functions? No. They conclude that "liver steatosis is actually therefore a non-pathological, totally reversible process".(21) How these researchers resuscitate the animals that die during force-feeding remains a mystery...

Dying, but Happy

If so many birds die from force-feeding, how do those who survive fare? A manual for force-feeders that describes the birds' state at the end of force-feeding talks of "the tired aspect of fatted poultry, their huge size, their

panting, and the animal that appears to have more and more difficulty moving".(22)

Still, INRA experts remain positive: "The results of [our] research do not support any of the claims put forth that this practice significantly endangers the well-being of palmipeds".(23)

Force-Feeding isn't Harmful... when it isn't Harmful

These same scientists explain that "in absence of wounds or pathological signs, force-feeding does not appear to be a source of 'pain'".(24)

So why this clarification? Because, as one of their experimental logs shows (25), the researchers in question noted that force-feeding causes wounds and painful damage to the esophagus... By excluding the observations proving harm by force-feeding, they are comfortable with concluding that it is harmless!

These same experts use the exact same procedure to determine the states of livers: first, they claim that "a good foie gras will normally not have

macroscopic lesions, areas of necrosis or hemorrhage".(26) Using this definition that automatically excludes livers showing these problems, it is convenient for them to conclude that, "a fatted liver liver obtained through force-feeding is therefore not, in any case, a sick organ".

Here is how similar reasoning would sound in the debate over the dangers of tobacco: "In absence of tracheal irritation, the passage of smoke in the throat is not a source of discomfort. We have also observed that a person who quits smoking in time can have lungs resembling those of a non-smoker. The results of our scientific research do not support the idea that smoking is harmful."

Nothing would actually be false in such a statement... one that carefully avoids the term 'lung cancer' as well as any mention of the life expectancy of smokers.

Happy to be Force-Fed?

Do palmipeds show an aversion to force-feeding? In a magazine aimed at the general public, INRA

In 1995, even as the European Commission was planning to force egg producers to give a bit more space to hens in battery cages, an INRA researcher, Jean-Michel Faure, claimed that "a large cage is not a welfare requirement for these poultry birds, whose current cages are of sufficient size".(27)

Egg producers were satisfied by the bold support of this researcher. INRA management were less thrilled when the pamphlet *Hens Prefer Cages* was published, making a mockery of the claim and casting doubt on the institute's scientific credibility.

Since the 1980s, foie gras production, promoted as a traditional and small-scale business, also relies on the most extreme factory farming methods. According to statistics from the industry itself (28), more than 87% of ducks, nearly all of those who are force-fed for major brands, are enclosed during force-feeding in battery cages



so small that they cannot even turn around, much less stretch their wings.

Even though the installation of new cages of this type has been illegal since January 2005 by a European recommendation, foie gras producers refuse to comply. The French Ministry of Agriculture, a traditional ally of agro-business, is currently fighting the Council of Europe in order to allow the continuation of this type of extreme enclosure.(29) The INRA researchers' opinion on this matter? For the force-feeding of ducks, "rearing in individual [battery] cages is the best solution".(30)



researchers state that the geese “go to be force-fed just as they would go feed themselves on their own,” and that this practice “doesn’t scare them any more than feeding does”.(31) However, experiments at their own institute a few years earlier show that, during a force-feeding period, a goose refuses to eat for several days if no longer forced...(32) So, who should we believe – the geese or the INRA researchers?

When it comes to defending force-feeding for ducks, these same experts maintain that “force-fed palmipeds develop (...) no avoidance behavior toward the force-feeder,”(33) but when the threat of a ban on cages comes into play, they recall that their “main advantage lies with the fact that handling (...) related to force-feeding is made easier; the animal is unable to escape or turn around” (see inset on previous page).

No Alternatives to Force-Feeding?

Do alternatives to force-feeding exist for the production of foie gras? “We really don’t have anything available (...) to be able to produce foie gras without force-feeding,” states Marie-Pierre Pé, the chief representative of CIFOG.(34) “To produce foie gras without force-feeding, for the time being, still needs some work!” (35) confirms Gérard Guy, an INRA researcher.

His colleague, Daniel Guémené, has returned from Chicago, where he participated in the campaign aiming to reinstate the sale of foie gras in the city, following a ban in August 2006.(36) Perhaps he will have taken the opportunity to try one of the alternative non force-fed varieties, called ‘faux gras,’ that Chicago restaurants developed only a few weeks after the ban.(37) Will all this help INRA to speed up its research on foie gras alternatives?

Nothing could be less certain... Even though, ten years ago already, a

INRA studies: a fruitful investment for producers

- In 1998, a report written by experts from the European Commission (43) (including 3 INRA researchers):
 - concludes that force-feeding “as currently practised, is detrimental to the welfare of the birds”;
 - advocates switching to methods that do not use force-feeding;
 - recommends banning individual battery cages.
- Since 1998, foie gras producers fund the studies of some INRA researchers, who affirm that in reality:
 - force-fed birds do not suffer and are not sick;
 - production methods that do not use force-feeding are inconceivable at this time;
 - battery cages are the best solution.

Belgian butcher developed a product using non-steatotic livers (38), INRA researchers claim to this day, with no justification, that this approach “is simplistic (...) and doesn’t effectively correspond to the demand” (39) for force-feeding alternatives. It is difficult to understand how the work that one single butcher took on several years ago could be so out of reach for the flagship French agricultural research institute.

An Embarrassing Scientific Report

In 1998, the Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare of the European Commission published a 93-page report on the welfare of birds used for foie gras production. This report was based on the work of a 12-person working group, which included 3 INRA scientists. After an extensive review of the existing literature (over 166 references) and visits to foie gras farms, the committee’s conclusions were critical of force-feeding and recommended the development of alternative methods of production (see inset on top of page).

The very existence of this report worries the foie gras industry because it has provided a significant scientific argument in the debates leading up to the foie gras ban in most European countries, and more recently in Israel and California. In a document published by the US foie gras industry,

the INRA researchers now seek to discredit this embarrassing report:

“the scientific data do not support the statement written in the report from the European Veterinary Scientific Committee (1998) that ‘[t]he scientific committee on animal health and animal welfare concludes that force feeding, as currently practiced, is detrimental to the welfare of the birds.’ That statement, while clearly taken for granted by opponents of foie gras, was based on the very limited amount of scientific literature available at the time and is not supported by the extensive scientific experimentation done in the intervening years”.(40)

In order to contradict the European report’s conclusions, these INRA researchers reference 15 scientific studies (41) that were published after the European report. All but one are their own studies commissioned by the foie gras industry, and the last one was directly authored by employees of the industry.(42)

Who would dare claim that legislation on questions of public health related to tobacco and alcohol should be influenced by studies commissioned by Philip Morris and the Beer Wholesalers Association? Why should it be any different when what is at stake is the welfare of birds force-fed for the profit of the foie gras industry?

Foie Gras: Debating the Suffering of Ducks

A book exposes the fact that animal welfare research on force-fed animals is financed by the foie gras industry.

“There is no scientific proof that this practice (force-feeding) is a source of animal maltreatment.” This categorical statement by Daniel Guémené, a researcher from the Inra (1) avian research station in Nouzilly, near Tours, reappears on the cover of a book about force-feeding and foie gras that came out last month.(2) Right above the quote is a photo of two ducks in their cage during force-feeding: the animal in the foreground’s bill is wide open and panting, still covered with corn mash; in the background the second animal’s bill is being carelessly held open by a farmer holding a long tube with a funnel attached to the end in his other hand. The message is clear. Inra scientists are blind to the same things that leap off the page to sensitive eyes, that force-feeding is an ordeal for ducks.

But the book by Antoine Comiti, an activist from the organization Stop Gavage (Stop Force-Feeding), doesn’t merely want to be an indictment of factory farming and animal suffering. The author, who is also a medical computer science consultant, voices serious doubts about the neutrality of Inra researchers working on animal welfare. Their work is funded in part by Cifog (the French foie gras producers’ association), which has, as any trade group worth its name, the sole goal of increasing production. He sees an obvious conflict of interest when they are asked to provide expertise on the suffering of force-fed ducks. They can be counted on to furnish results that the industry expects.



“I would like other teams in the world to work with our issue and be able to come up with a contradiction,” explains Daniel Guémené, with whom we spoke in his Nouzilly office. “Our studies were published in journals with peer-review committees. We did everything by the rules. The research contracts we signed have received much publicity. I am completely willing to accept financing from Stop Gavage.”

Behind the controversy, the question of Inra’s position has emerged as well. For sixty years, the public institute has been serving the interests of developing the agricultural industry, with widely recognized success.

“Contradictory Orders”

But today, these same measures it helped to establish are being reconsidered. The French research law, passed in March 2006, now assigns a dual role to public research entities: helping economic actors innovate while also producing independent expertise. This represents “contradictory orders,” comments Rémi Barré, a specialist in the research process. This is the essence of what Antoine Comiti’s book brings to light. Inra management maintains that it has already taken these questions into consideration. “Agri Bien-Etre” (Agro Well-Being), a working group open to civil society, meets regularly, and the

ethics committee has carefully considered the framework provided to the various partnerships of the Institute.

The issue of animal suffering has long been the subject of numerous debates in Northern Europe and in Anglo-Saxon countries. It is still surfacing in France. Foie gras industry professionals turned to Inra research to contradict a report by European Commission experts who denounced force-feeding in 1998, considering that it was causing suffering for ducks. Last spring, Israel decided to stop foie gras production for this reason. This year, some American cities like Chicago decided to ban foie gras consumption in restaurants. Daniel Guémené is regularly called upon to present the results of his research showing the absence of a stress hormone in ducks during force-feeding. “When I started researching stress indicators in ducks, I was quite surprised not to find anything,” recalls Daniel Guémené.

“The problem is knowing whether these strictly biological indicators suffice in defining animal well-being,” questions nonetheless Florence Bargout, director of research at Inra.

YVES MISEREY

(1) Institut national de recherche agronomique (French National Institute for Agricultural Research).

(2) *L’INRA au secours du foie gras* (Inra to the Rescue of Foie Gras), by Antoine Comiti, Editions Sentience, 25 euros.

INRA Accused of Connivance with the foie gras industry

Each year in France, 30 million palmipeds—most of them ducks—are force-fed in order to produce foie gras, the delicacy of choice for special occasions. Force-feeding involves over-enlarging the liver by filling the animal's stomach with large quantities of corn over a twelve day period, using a tube called an 'embuc'.

Animal rights organizations condemn this practice, judged harmful to the well-being of birds. To counter their arguments, foie gras producers stand behind studies by the French National Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA).

It just so happens that the studies in question are in part (up to 20%) financed by the Interprofessional Committee for Foie Gras (Cifog), which promotes the industry.

In a well-documented work titled *INRA to the Rescue of Foie Gras* (Editions Sentience, 274 p., €25), Antoine Comiti, president of the organization Stop Gavage, picks apart the methods that certain researchers use, in his opinion, to generate data which absolve factory farming.

Mr. Comiti notes that this research attempts to counter the conclusions of a study published in 1998 by experts to the European Commission, who denounced force-feeding and inspired recommendations from the Council of Europe enacted in 1999. These recommendations banned force-feeding in countries where it was not practiced yet, prohibited the use of small, individual cages and encouraged research on alternative methods.

Increased Mortality

In a summary of INRA research on the topic, presented in 2004,

ALIMENTATION POLÉMIQUE SUR LE GAVAGE

L'INRA accusé de connivence avec la filière du foie gras

CHACQUE année, en France, 30 millions de palmipèdes – essentiellement des canards – sont gavés pour produire du foie gras, mets de choix des repas de fête. Le gavage consiste à pousser une hypertrophie du foie en introduisant, sur une douzaine de jours, de grandes quantités de maïs dans l'estomac de l'animal, à l'aide d'un tuyau, l'embuc.

Les associations de défense des animaux dénoncent cette pratique, jugée préjudiciable au bien-être du volatile. Pour combattre leurs arguments, les producteurs de foie gras se rattachent derrière des travaux de l'Institut national de recherche agronomique (INRA).

Il se trouve que les études en question sont pour partie (jusqu'à 20 %) financées par le Comité interprofessionnel des palmipèdes à foie gras (Cifog), qui promeut la filière.

Dans un ouvrage très documenté, intitulé *L'INRA au secours du foie gras* (Editions Sentience, 274 p., 25 €), Antoine Comiti, président de l'association Stop-Gavage, décortique la façon dont certains chercheurs l'ingénierent, à son sens, à produire des données dédouanant cet élevage intensif.

M. Comiti note que ces travaux

visent à contredire les conclusions d'une étude publiée en 1998 par des experts auprès de la Commission européenne, qui condamnait le gavage et avait inspiré des recommandations du Conseil de l'Europe édictées en 1999. Celle-ci interdisait le gavage dans les pays où il n'était pas encore pratiqué, prohibait l'usage de petites cages individuelles et recommandait des études sur des méthodes alternatives.

Mortalité élevée

Dans une synthèse des travaux de l'INRA sur la question, présentée en 2004, des chercheurs de l'Institut concluaient que le gavage « n'apparaît pas comme un générateur important d'informations nocives [de douleur] », conclusions fondées sur le comportement des palmipèdes et la mesure d'hormones de stress.

« Il s'agit de pseudo-science et de recherches d'apparence, conduites par des chercheurs dévils dans le monde de la production animale », tranche Robert Dantzer, tout juste retraité de l'INRA, où il était précisément spécialiste de ces hormones de stress. M. Dantzer, qui figurait parmi les auteurs du rapport européen de 1998, estime qu'« on ignore si la mortalité en

question est permise chez le canard en phase de gavage ».

En revanche, note-t-il, il existe un indicateur de bien-être animal fort lisible, que ses collègues négligent curieusement : celui de la mortalité. Les chiffres sont pourtant disponibles, fournis par les professionnels. En 2002, après 13,4 jours de gavage en moyenne, 3 % des animaux (soit près d'un million) étaient morts, « une proportion six fois plus élevée que chez leurs congénères en élevage classique », rapporte Antoine Comiti.

« Pour le porc, lors des trois premières semaines de vie, la mortalité peut atteindre 12 % », relève-t-il, curieusement, Patrick Herpin, directeur scientifique adjoint à la production animale. Il rappelle que l'INRA dispose d'un comité d'éthique et d'un groupe baptisé Agri bien-être animal. En 2006, ce réseau de chercheurs disposait d'un budget de 5 400 euros, « totalement insuffisant pour couvrir des recherches autonomes », déplore Antoine Comiti.

Conscient que sa proximité avec le monde agricole peut engendrer des conflits d'intérêt, l'INRA prévoit, depuis plusieurs années, d'élaborer une charte de partenariat socio-économique et d'instaurer un système de « déclara-

tion d'intérêt » pour ses chercheurs.

Dans l'immédiat, la direction scientifique a proposé un rendez-vous, le 24 janvier, à Antoine Comiti. Véritablement réticent, le président de Stop-Gavage estime que des connivences existent avec d'autres filières de production animale et souhaite, à travers l'exemple du gavage, « poser la question de ce qu'il est légitime de faire aux animaux pour les manger ».

H. M.

GUAYANE

Parc national : la commission d'enquête publique désavouée

Le projet de parc national en Guyane et son décret de création seront soumis au Conseil d'Etat, en janvier, sans aucun des aménagements proposés par la commission d'enquête publique, a-t-on appris jeudi 28 décembre. L'avis du préfet de Guyane rejette, en particulier, deux recommandations des commissions enquêteurs : le classement en zone intégralement protégée de 5 000 km² aux alentours des villages amérindiens du sud de Maripasoula et le classement en zone de libre adhésion de la région des montagnes Belvédère-Lézard. – (AUF)

researchers from the Institute concluded that force-feeding “does not appear to be a significant cause of nociceptive information (pain),” with conclusions based on the behavior of palmipeds and the measurement of stress hormones.

“This is pseudo science and opportunistic research driven by researchers reared in the field of Animal Production,” says Robert Dantzer, who has just recently retired from INRA, where he specialized in these same stress hormones. Mr. Dantzer, who was among the authors of the 1998 European report, believes that “we don't know if the molecule in question is relevant in the case of ducks during force-feeding.”

On the other hand, he notes, a clear indicator of animal well-being does exist, one that his colleagues strangely neglect: animal mortality. Yet the figures are available and provided by professionals. In 2002, after an average of 13.4 days of force-feeding, 3% of the animals (or about one million) were dead, “a proportion six times higher than that of their counterparts raised in standard conditions,” reports Antoine Comiti.

Patrick Herpin, the assistant scientific director of animal production, makes a strange comparison: “For pigs, from three weeks of life, mortality can reach 12 %.” He mentions that INRA has an ethics committee and a group called ‘Agri bien-être animal’ (Agro animal well-being). In 2006, this group of researchers had a budget of 5,400 euros, which is “totally insufficient for conducting independent research,” criticizes Antoine Comiti.

Aware that its ties with the agricultural industry may cause conflicts of interest, INRA has been planning for several years to draw up a socio-economic partnership charter and to instate a “statement of interest” for its researchers.

For the time being, the scientific management has proposed a meeting with Antoine Comiti on January 24th. A proud vegetarian, the president of Stop Gavage believes that connivances with other animal production industries exist and hopes, using force-feeding as an example, “to ask what is legitimate to do to animals in order to eat them.”

HERVE MORIN

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Unless otherwise mentioned, the photos used in this article were taken in the French Department of Gers in April, 2004, by Dominic Hofbauer for Stop Gavage.