

Livestock in the City

Facilitator Aley Kent of Heifer International introduced herself and the speakers. Heifer International works to help families and communities raise animals in a sustainable and humane way. About ten years ago Heifer International began focusing on livestock in urban areas.

Owen Taylor started out as Just Food's Chicken Intern and now runs the Just Food Chicken Project and is the Just Food Urban Training and Chicken Coordinator. Urban chickens help make the ideas of food justice and food sovereignty more of a reality for local communities. Not only do chickens provide fresh eggs, they also play an important role in making a more productive ecosystem. A couple years ago the City Chicken Working Group was created to develop program for keeping urban chickens. They explored several questions including: Is it legal? What are the legal issues? How to do it well? This became the City Chicken Committee, which brought together members of greening groups, urban agriculture groups, and community gardens for training, workshops, development of ideal coop for health and design, creating an application process, and finding funding. Stressed the importance of complete community commitment to keeping chickens in the city. Showed photos of past projects including the Garden of Happiness in the Bronx. So far Just Food has only been working with already established chicken projects, but is hoping to create new projects in the future.

Karla Osorio-Perez works for the Brooklyn Botanical Garden and the Brooklyn Compost Project. She outlined the importance of vermi-composting. 50% of waste in the city is compostable. What to do with all that waste? Worms! Worms help educate people about composting. It is especially important to educate adults about worms and break the myths that people believe about worms and composting. By adopting worms people are able to understand, share, and participate in the compost cycle. Teachers are a great way to teach kids about worms and compost. Kids love worms. Keeping worms in the classroom creates and sensitivity to taking care of worms and creates a peaceful space in the classroom. Through the Master Composter Certificate Program adults are prepared to spread information about worms and compost in their communities. This program teaches adults how to talk to people about worms, how compost works, and also the biology of worms. Through education, workshops, worm bins, etc. waste can be reduced even in the small spaces of an urban environment. Showed pictures of workshops at Greenbridge Community Gardens and Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. Worms not only reduce waste they create better soil by increasing nitrogen, biodiversity, and providing aeration.

Roger Repohl keeps three beehives in the Bronx at Genesis Park Garden. Bees are not so much livestock as they are friends. In 1999 started beekeeping to increase productivity in the garden. Finding the right site is the most important part of beekeeping in an urban area. The greatest difference between beekeeping in the country and beekeeping in the city is that in the city public relations are very important, especially since beekeeping is actually illegal in New York City. It's important to create a flight path that keeps bees and people out of each other's way. Rooftops and green roofs are great places for keeping bees in the city. Bees have thrived in the South Bronx. Some of the benefits of

beekeeping are pollination; other pollinators (like bumble bees) are attracted to gardens by the smell of curing honey, honey (food production), and education. Teaching people about beekeeping helps them understand the role pollinators play in food production and also helps defuse some of their fears and misconceptions of bees. Showed pictures of the hives and various people working with the bees.

Eric Toensmeier works for Nuestras Raíces as the director of Tierra de Oportunidades Farm. This organization is based in Holyoke, MA. Holyoke was a big industrial town and has had several waves of immigrant workers come through. In recent years the economy has collapsed and the most recent immigrants from Puerto Rico have had trouble finding work. This has created the curious dynamic of an urban area with many rural people living in it. What started as a community garden where people could reconnect with the land and their rural roots has become a community farm. The farm is thirty acres only two miles from downtown. It is on world class farmland and has ten farmers. It's become an agritourism destination. There are goats, pigs, rabbits, chickens, and horses on the farm. Some of these animals can be bought directly from the farm for home slaughter. The farm has a traditional la lachonera barbeque that creates added value, connects people with their cultural traditions, and allows for direct interaction between people working on the farm and members of the community. Many of the species of livestock are culturally connected to Puerto Rico. Besides being food they provide many important services for the health of the farm's ecosystem including manure for fertilizer, clearing land of weeds, and eating crop waste and weeds. Showed a slideshow outlining all the aspects of the animals on the farm in greater detail.

After all the speakers had outlined their various projects Aley asked questions.

What are some of the differences between rural and urban livestock?

Karla, in the case of worms the space is the same, but what they're fed is very different. In some rural areas worms eat mostly corn and manure, whereas the city worms are fed mostly food scraps. Rural worms are working for rural cycles and urban worms are working for urban cycles.

Roger, the greatest challenge for urban beekeepers is other people. The honey quality in the city is much more varied.

Owen, people are definitely greatest challenge for urban chicken keepers. People are either excited about seeing chickens in the city or want to escape rural ideas by living in the city and so dislike the idea of having chickens around. It's important to show them that keeping chickens is a step forward for the city not backwards. People's excitement about chickens can act as a catalyst for getting them interested in thinking about and participating in food issues. Because there is less space for the chickens people have to find new inventive ways for them to graze. In New York you can keep many hens, but no roosters.

Eric, stealing is a major problem. It's important to have strong fences so that the animals don't escape into neighborhoods. Urban farming attracts more legal attention. Being close to a city gives the farm a greater market.

How is livestock relevant to food security?

Roger, beekeeping in the city will never be able to feed everyone honey, but it does provide a supplemental source. Pollination helps create greater productivity in community gardens.

Owen, it's small in scale (up to 50 chickens), but it does provide more nutritious eggs to the immediate community. The chicken's waste helps create more productive gardens.

Karla, by keeping worms you are part of the whole food cycle. The worms eat your food scraps and turn them into soil that you can use for your garden and create more food. You have a clearer idea of what you're eating.

Owen, no antibiotics makes for healthier animals makes for healthier eggs. By controlling the inputs you can insure healthier outputs.

In what ways have you overcome some of your biggest challenges?

Karla, education! By connecting with people and sharing the experience of keeping worms with people

Owen, communicating with everyone in the community to build full support for chickens in the city.

Roger, beekeepers need to be flexible about location. They have to find a place with the right environment for the bees, facilities for extraction, supportive community, and being willing to make a long term commitment.

Eric, good fencing is very important. Learning the laws around urban agriculture, zoning, and legislation help in the fight for opportunities. Community support makes changing laws possible.

The discussion was then opened up for everyone's questions or comments.

Someone asked about legal issues concerning chickens.

Owen, New York has a long history of chickens in the city.

Someone asked about legalizing bees in New York and beekeeping in other cities.

Talked a little about Just Food's efforts to legalize bees in the city and beekeeping projects in other Chicago, San Francisco, and Portland.

Someone asked about other possible projects for New York?

People mentioned rabbits (which are big in the Northwest), goats (which have just been legalized in Seattle), growing power (which includes worms, chickens, and goats)