

The pig whisperer: the Dutch farmer who wants to end factory farming

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“Oma, hoi! Hier! Hallooo,” Dr Kees Scheepens, a Dutch farmer known as the “pig whisperer”, is calling his two oldest pigs for some apricot snacks.

Scheepens, 61, says he is the 19th generation of farmers in his family, and that after years practicing as a vet, he is driven by an unusual set of ambitions: “emancipating” farm animals, putting animal welfare first, and eating far less, far happier meat.

As he walks around feeding and talking a little French to his 28 sows (according to Scheepens, “*neuf*”, is their grunt of confirmation, and “*buit, buit*” is them asking for more) the place seems idyllic. The pigs are fed on produce being thrown away by organic supermarket: white cabbages, slightly wilted beans, veggie-balls, lentils, overripe mangoes.

“Am I rich in money? No, but I’m primarily motivated by emancipating farm animals.” He started his pig project almost a decade ago, aiming to help bring open-air farming back to the muddy Netherlands, and pioneer a new type of barn farming.

“Factory farming of pigs in the Netherlands is a dead end,” he says. “We now know that a pig is not a thing: it is a sentient being with a high level of intelligence, comparable with the intelligence of a child. What I see worldwide is that many pig farmers don’t know any more what pigs are about. They just don’t have the skills to know what’s right and what’s wrong.”

What’s wrong, he believes, is factory farming where cannibalistic “vices” such as tail biting replace normal pig behaviour such as rooting around for food. This leads to widespread “tail docking” in many parts of Europe to stop animals eating each other’s tails, even though the practice is banned.

Instead, Scheepens argues, pigs need a more natural environment, to be able to root around in beds of straw or wood chips and have outdoor access, with a special toilet replacing slatted floors. “I would say pigs are the most hygienic animals we have on the farm,” he says. “They will not poo or pee in their nest. Pooing always goes well: their noses are so sensitive, they recognise the smell.”

To encourage them to urinate separately, he has created a reward system: a machine delivering candies when their urine goes through a special floor membrane in an outside “toilet” area.

Why is peeing important for sustainable farming? There will not be the contact between a nitrogen compound found in urine and an enzyme in the manure: that creates ammonia, and that’s one of the main factors in the nitrogen discussions in the Netherlands.

“Meat has become a throwaway product, where the true value is not seen any more. Wouldn’t it be nice if farmers were offered an income with the same farm and half of the animals? Sustainability can only be there in my perception when you take care of animal welfare first.”

The Netherlands is a densely populated country, and the land is often poorly drained. So as well as outdoor farming, Scheepens wants to revolutionise animal barns so smells and emissions are reduced, and pigs can laze, eat, root and wallow as nature intended.

“The last three to four generations have started using fertilisers, pesticides and going from big, bigger to biggest,” he says. “That was the societal trend in agriculture, but I think we have to become smartest. I don’t want to have a grandchild saying to me: ‘you broke that tradition of farming because you destroyed the Earth.’”

He thinks there’s no need for pig farming to stink: “in every farmer, there’s also a heart.”