



Urban Chicken-Keeping Movement Spreads Its Wings

By Matthew Cardinale

ATLANTA, Georgia, Mar 16, 2012 (IPS) - With increasing concerns about the economy and environmental sustainability on the minds of many U.S. citizens, leaders in the grassroots movement to promote urban chicken-keeping report a renewed interest in their cause.

According to the animal rights group [Farm Sanctuary](#), nearly 10 billion chickens and over a quarter billion turkeys are hatched in the U.S. annually. The conditions in most so-called factory farms are atrocious, with thousands of birds crammed into warehouses where they can barely move.



Many consumers now opt for organic, certified "cage-free" eggs, but those often cost two to three times more than conventional eggs and aren't carried by every supermarket chain. The alternative? Raise your own.

For example, the [Oakhurst Community Garden Project](#) (OCGP) recently held its fourth annual Chicks in the City Symposium in Decatur, Georgia, drawing about 50 participants to a full day of workshops. The purpose of the classes is to teach urban-dwellers the basics of keeping chickens in their backyards.

Classes included the symbiotic nature of chickens, breeds of chickens,

basics of coop construction and predator-proofing, what to feed your chickens, how to raise chicks, first aid and health, and how to set up community co-ops.

"The goal of our symposium is to inform and make people comfortable. (For) people who are already interested in having chickens, our symposium hopefully gives you the resources to take that step. A lot of people aren't confident," Andrea Zoppo, programme coordinator for the OCGP, told IPS.

OCGP holds year-round classes called Chickens Are Easy. The classes often sell out.

Zoppo also participates in a YahooGroup, an online discussion board that functions as an urban chicken-keeping support group.

While there is no national organisation for urban chicken-keepers, many communities have turned to online tools to support their poultry endeavors.

Andy Schneider, a national traveling urban chicken spokesman known as the "Chicken Whisperer", says he has used the website, Meetup.com, to organise community meetings.

Schneider, who currently lives in Ideal, Georgia, started the Atlanta Backyard Poultry Meetup Group in April 2008 and it currently has over 1,700 members, he says.

Zoppo explains the symbiosis of "a chicken in your space".

"First off, they fertilise the ground, they provide compost, the chicken poop is a wonderful garden additive. They keep pests down because they eat bugs," he said.

"Having kids, getting up in the morning, having kids collect eggs from the chicken coop is such a wonderful chore to give your child. It's so grounded. This is where your breakfast comes from. It empowers them," Zoppo said.

Other cities that are seeing a boom in backyard chicken keeping include Austin, Texas; Chicago, Illinois; New York City; Portland, Oregon, and San Francisco, California, according to Schneider.

Austin and Dallas, Texas, have Coop Tours, which are similar to Homes

and Garden Tours, but where people travel around and look at each others' chicken coops, Zoppo said.

Schneider never intended to become the Chicken Whisperer. He insists he does not actually communicate with the chickens, and that the nickname was given to him by the media.

"My wife and I had chickens long before it was cool, in Johns Creek (Georgia). It became a part-time business, to sell some chicks on the side," Schneider said.

Now he has an online daily radio show every weekday from 12pm to 2pm, all about backyard poultry and sustainability.

He also serves as a national spokesperson for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Biosecurity for Birds programme. And he released a book in September 2011, "The Chicken Whisperer's Guide to Keeping Chickens".

Schneider agrees there is a renewed interest in chicken-keeping. "We call it a movement oftentimes. Nobody in the U.S. is further than one or two generations away from getting our own food from the backyard.

"That's why big cities still allow chickens," he said.

Typically, big cities and rural areas permit residents to raise a small number of birds. However, some of the suburbs that have sprouted up in recent decades have passed laws banning chicken-keeping or making it very difficult to keep chickens.

Schneider works with community activists in cities nationwide to change laws to allow urban chicken-keeping. He says activists scored a big victory in Nashville, Tennessee in January.

He's currently working on chicken legislation campaigns in Chelsea, Michigan; Tampa, Florida; and Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Explaining people's renewed interest in chicken-keeping, Zoppo said, "The economy probably plays some role in it, and the environment, and having a vested interest in knowing where your food comes from.

"You don't have to go outside your community to have what you need for your family. It's pretty deep. More and more people want to be self-sufficient."

The Worldwatch Institute [notes](#) that an added bonus of home-raised livestock and backyard agriculture is that it avoids the energy usage and carbon emissions typically associated with transporting food long distances.

Factory farms also have serious impacts on human health, and can pollute local air and water.

A 2008 [report](#) by the Government Accountability Office said that large livestock and poultry operations can produce more than 1.6 million tonnes of animal waste a year, with single farms generating more raw waste than the populations of some U.S. cities produce annually.

"Since 2002, at least 68 government-sponsored or peer-reviewed studies have been completed that examined air and water quality issues associated with animal feeding operations and 15 have directly linked air and water pollutants from animal waste to specific health or environmental impacts," the report warned.

"Our (large-scale agriculture) system's not really working. There's a lot of food scares and recalls. People get eggs and they don't really have a flavour. When you have chickens that you keep, they eat bugs and things they're supposed to eat, they (the eggs) have flavour," Zoppo said.

"We particularly support people being in urban areas and growing food and having chickens. While being in the comfort of an urban society, you can do both. Chickens don't take up too much space."